

**Otherside
Picnic: Volume
5**

Iori Miyazawa

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File 16: Pontianak Hotel

Love Hotel Girls' Party [luhv hoh-tel gurls **pahr-tee**]

noun, slang

Of all the types of parties attended only by girls, this is the variety held in a love hotel.

Example Used in Speech:

"Fine. Then when we get back, let's go to one! Not in a stupid ruin like this! To a real love hotel girls' party!"

"Let's go, then. To a love hotel girls' party. You eat honey toast and stuff, right? Not that I'd know."

1

"Have you ever gotten so drunk you don't remember what happened?" I asked, and Migiwa, sitting across from me in the reception room, raised an eyebrow as if I was asking an unexpected question.

"I have not had that much to drink in years now, but... Yes. I did things like that a long time ago."

"A long time ago..."

"When I was around your age, Kamikoshi-san. Perhaps a little younger."

"...Wouldn't that have made you underage at the time?"

"People were more tolerant of that kind of thing in those days. And this was not in Japan."

After that response, Migiwa took a sip from his cup of coffee, which had come from the espresso machine in the corner of the room. I hesitantly took a sip from my own and found it unbelievably bitter. I gave it a shot because it was something I'd heard you drink with a heaping helping of sugar, but I ended up throwing in the towel.

It was mid-January. I had come alone to the DS Research building in Tameike-Sannou. My seat-of-the-pants idea to monopolize the Farm for ourselves by having them hire me on as a manager for the site had been accepted with surprising ease, and I was here now to sign a formal contract.

Migiwa's office was so neat and tidy it looked like something out of a model home. There was a minibar in the corner with an espresso machine, a tiny refrigerator, and glasses.

General Incorporated Foundation: Dark Science Research Encouragement Association—Director of DS Research, Youichirou Migiwa. This mysterious man, looking smart in his three-piece suit, lived well after wrangling funding from the wealthy in the name of preserving his organization. Not only did he have personal connections to a private military contractor, he was able to use firearms himself, and was used to resorting to violence. There was no way this guy was on the up-and-up. It was mystifying to think that this strange individual was included among the few people—a number small enough to count on little more than one hand—that I knew.

The contract was quick and to the point, fitting on a mere three sheets of paper. It first laid out the salary of a manager, which was to be raised in the event that it was not enough to justify the danger. The amount was not especially high (at least to my mind), but this job had been created whole-cloth based on a random idea I had, so I was not about to complain. For me, securing the Farm as a base for exploring the other world was the important thing. I would take what money I could get, though. Obviously.

As I read through the contract, I came to the item regarding payment of necessary expenses, and noticed there was no upper limit indicated. I didn't want to count my chickens before they hatched, so I decided to inquire further.

"It only says 'will be decided by the mutual agreement of both parties' here, but is there a more specific number?" I asked.

"You could rephrase that to 'within the realm of common sense.'"

"I'm not sure I like how vague that is..." I said. Glancing up, I saw Migiwa was looking at me with amusement.

"What?" I asked.

"I'd like to turn the question around. How much do you want to use, Kamikoshi-san?"

I didn't know what to say. The truth was, I had meant to expense a whole bunch of equipment. I was hesitant to come right out and say as much though.

"I don't really...have a number in mind at the moment."

"We can decide on a framework for expenses. However many yen at a time, or however many yen per year. But in the event we did, you would never be able to use more than that."

I was unclear on what this meant. "So we can just spend as much as we want?"

"No. The amount will be determined *with the mutual agreement of both parties.*"

"Erm..."

"Surely you have something you wish to do at that facility," Migiwa said, narrowing his eyes. "Or perhaps I should say 'in UBL.'"

And you do not want us involved in your activities. Am I wrong?"

"Uh, well..."

"..."

"...You could tell?"

"Somewhat, yes. You were so quick to chase us out that I think anyone would have."

He was talking about the time Migiwa and his people went back to the Farm with us. At the time, I had been in a rush to secure the gates inside the buildings, and made everyone but Toriko and me leave. I was relieved when Migiwa agreed to it so easily, but I never suspected he was on to me.

As I awkwardly averted my eyes, Migiwa said, "To be clear, I am not blaming you. You are not my subordinate, and you are not a member of DS Research. I am in no position to complain."

"Well, uh, yeah."

"I have no desire to leave the Farm unattended, and I do believe you are an appropriate caretaker for the facility. That is why I was actually grateful for your proposal. However... If I may be so bold, Kamikoshi-san, I'm not someone who can be taken advantage of."

Migiwa was always so polite, I was surprised at the way he came straight out and said that.

"I-Is that right?"

"Yes. While we do mean to put some limits on you with this contract, we have no intention of mandating you do anything in particular as part of your duties or to make you work for our benefit. You are the sort of person who detests being controlled, Kamikoshi-san. If you ever appear to be acting obedient, we have to assume you are doing terrifying things when we are unable to see you."

"Uh, no... I don't think so..." I mumbled, perplexed.

What kind of evaluation was that? What kind of person did he think I was?

Migiwa smiled inscrutably and continued. "If DS Research is to invest our money in a person who is friendly but uncontrollable, there must be a way for us to monitor their actions... We considered a number of methods, and ultimately concluded that it would be effective to institute a framework for expenses."

"Erm... Is there some reason you didn't include a maximum amount?"

"Well, if I were given a budget framework, I would constantly use the maximum amount of necessary expenses."

"..."

"However, if that framework does not exist, when you wish to make use of a large amount of money, you will need to be more cautious. And you will come to consult with me on each occasion.

Because..."

"...Because the amount is decided on the basis of agreement between both parties," I said.

"Precisely."

I squinted at the man sitting on the sofa across from me. Migiwa's smile deepened in response.

"Inconvenient, is it not?"

"...Yeah." I finally got it. This would limit my ability to use up DS Research's money under the guise of business expenses, while also giving them oversight if I chose to seriously remodel the facility.

The man was shrewd. I had to give him that.

I must have looked awfully upset, because Migiwa added, "I am being quite forthright with you here."

"I see."

"I have no intention of getting in your way, Kamikoshi-san, rest assured of that. And yet, at the same time, I understand."

"Understand what?"

"I have done the same sorts of things in my own life."

Hm...? I was so caught by surprise that I didn't know what to say.

So, basically, he thought we were the same type of person? That I was the same as a mystery man covered in Mayan tattoos, with a face like an intellectual yakuza, who excelled in the use of money and violence? That makes me sound like...an outlaw, or something.

As I blinked, Migiwa looked back down at the contract. "I shall move on to the next item, if that is all right."

"Oh! Uh, sure."

Changing gears and moving on from the shock I felt, I reviewed the remaining items in the contract. It was a short document, but it took maybe an hour and a half. It must have used parts of my brain I wasn't used to using, because I felt tired when it was done.

Migiwa handed me a copy of the slightly amended contract, then, as if suddenly recalling something, he said, "Come to think of it, I was surprised. I had expected both of you to come today. Was Nishina-san unable to make it?"

"Oh, uh... About that..." I began before hesitating to say more.

"Did something happen?"

"I don't remember if something happened."

"You...don't remember? Well, that is certainly unsettling."

Migiwa's brow furrowed, so I hurriedly shook my head.

"No, not like that. It's nothing serious... Probably."

"But..."

"It's really fine..." I may not have looked "fine" at all when I said that. Migiwa adjusted his sitting posture.

"If it helps, I can offer advice. Or would you prefer to speak to our

medical staff?"

"No... That's not it..." I hesitated a moment, then finally decided to fess up and asked, "Have you ever gotten so drunk you don't remember what happened?"

2

"A mistake with alcohol, is it? That is most unexpected. I had heard you hold your liquor quite well."

"I think I have a pretty high tolerance, but I must have gone over it that day. The next thing I knew it was morning, and I felt awful."

"Ah-ha. And this is why you had no memories of the previous night?"

"I wonder if that's what a hangover is..."

It was days ago, and yet thinking back to it still made me feel terrible. I shook my head. "Do the memories come back later, usually?" I asked.

"That may vary from person to person. I lost my memory entirely."

"What was it like for you, Migiwa-san?"

"The first time I drank to the point of losing my memory, if I recall, I had been in an argument with a local gang and ended up partaking in a drinking contest involving tequila... When I awoke, it was noon, and I was lying in a ditch. I have no recollection of what occurred, but given I survived, I suppose I must have won."

"Um, I think that goes a bit beyond it being a more tolerant era..."

"I was such a child. How embarrassing." Migiwa scratched his neck awkwardly.

I don't know what he did all those years ago, but it was freaky having such an abnormal story come up in response to a pretty ordinary question. I wished he wouldn't do that.

"Who were you with when you drank yourself into a stupor? Why not ask them about it?" Migiwa asked.

"I did, but she won't tell me."

"Nishina-san won't?"

"Uh, yeah."

"Ah-ha..."

"This is just me speculating here, but I'm pretty sure I messed up and did something I shouldn't have."

"An all too common story, yes. In that case, why not have Kozakura-san ask her on your behalf?"

"The thing is, Kozakura-san was drinking with us too."

"Did you try asking her?"

"Yeah, and of course, she won't tell me a thing."

"I see... Then why not ask someone else?"

"Yeah, uh, that's the thing. Everyone I know was there."

"I see... And you've asked the others as well?"

"They wouldn't tell me."

"Ah-ha."

"No one will say a word. They won't tell me what I did."

"I...see."

This guy "sees" a lot.

"Considering the time of year, was it a forget-the-year party, or a New Year's party?"

"It was a...party," I said, mumbling.

"Sorry, I didn't quite get that."

"A love hotel girls' party." I covered my face and sighed.

"Ah-ha... I see." It took some time for Migiwa to respond, but maybe that was only natural.

It happened soon after the start of the year—January 2nd, to be precise. Toriko and I had met up in Ikebukuro to eat ramen, go shopping, and enjoy the relaxed New Year's atmosphere. While we were window shopping for clothes at a busy New Year's sale, Toriko brought up the subject I had been dreading.

"Oh, yeah. When're we doing the love hotel girls' party?"

"Urgh... You remembered that, huh?"

"Like I'd ever forget. I've been looking forward to it all this time."

When we spent a night in a love hotel on the Otherside, we had a lengthy argument over what exactly a love hotel girls' party was like. Neither of us had any experience with that sort of thing, so it was all pretty vapid. But in the heat of the moment I'd blurted it all out.

"When we get back, let's go to one! Not in a stupid ruin like this! To a real love hotel girls' party!"

"Fine. Let's go."

"Are you serious?"

And that's how I got myself into this mess. I wish she'd forgotten... I was just arguing. I hadn't meant for her to take it seriously...

"So, when are we going?"

"Whaaa..."

"What's that face for?"

"Uh... How about we wait until it's a bit warmer? It's cold, y'know?"

"What does the cold have to do with it? It's not so cold we can't go out."

"Well, no, but still."

"You said you'd go, Sorawo. You said it yourself."

"I..."

"..."

"I did. Yes."

"Good," Toriko said with a satisfied nod. Then, pressing her advantage over me, she continued. "So you'll be going then, right?"

"Urgh..."

Oh, geez, I thought to myself. This woman just doesn't let up lately. She was acting super shifty at the hot springs, and now she's getting carried away...

Whoa, hold up.

Don't tell me she doesn't know what people usually do at love hotels. That can't be it, right? Then again, Toriko didn't know what going to the hot springs was like in Japan either. It's entirely possible. Should I check? But if that's what's going on...

I glanced at Toriko's face as I was thinking, and our eyes met.

"What?"

No... I can't ask. I just can't. I'm too scared.

If she said she didn't know, I'd have to explain it to her. And if she did, I had nowhere to flee.

Huh? Is this checkmate?

The gears in my head whirled rapidly as Toriko waited for a response.

Hold on, hold on. This isn't good. Not at all. She's taken control of the conversation. If I'm gonna get out of this, I have to...

I took a deep breath, and then opened my mouth.

"Okay. Fine. Let's go."

"Okay!"

She looks so giddy...

"When do you want to do it? I'm good to go right now!"

"Today?! No way, it's not happening today. We probably have to make a reservation and stuff."

"Oh."

As I recall, they had girls' party plans that you could reserve. I think. Not that I'd know. It was all kind of unclear to me. "I'll make the reservation, so..."

"You will? Okay, please do."

"Just send me a message with any days that don't work for you later. Do you mind if I decide the place and attendees?"

"Sure, you go right ahead, Sorawo. That's fine with—" Toriko started to say, then stopped with a quizzical look on her face.

"Attendees? There's me, and you..."

"And Kozakura-san." When I added a name, Toriko looked at me wide-eyed.

"Why—"

I didn't give her the chance to argue back, I kept going. "And let's invite Akari, and Natsumi too. Five people sounds like enough."

“Huh? Huh? Why?”

As Toriko babbled in confusion, I kept up the know-it-all attitude. “Why? Because it’s a girls’ party, right? The more the merrier, I say.”

“That’s not—”

“Love hotel girls’ party plans are intended for larger groups.”

“They...are?”

“Yeah. They are.”

Not that I’d know. Actually, I was pretty much certain the two of us could go alone.

“I mean, if it was just the two of us, it wouldn’t be a love hotel girls’ party, it’d be like, uh, something else. You know? So let’s have fun with a group of five...”

Toriko gave me a resentful look as I was saying things I didn’t really mean.

“What? What’s that look for?” I asked her.

“No fair, Sorawo.”

“What’s not fair?”

“...”

“You want to call it off then?”

“No fair! We’re not calling it off!”

Say whatever you like.

Anyway, that’s how Toriko, Kozakura, Akari, Natsumi, and I ended up holding a love hotel girls’ party. When I explained this, omitting some of the details, Migiwa got a bewildered look on his face.

“It’s awkward for me to be the one saying this, but is this really something you should be talking to me about?”

“Honestly, I was hesitant, but I figured it was probably fine,” I said, and Migiwa arched one eyebrow.

“And why is that?”

“If it was just a matter of me doing something embarrassing, or humiliating myself, that would be fine, but...”

Okay, no, it wouldn’t be fine at all, but...

“I’m most concerned about this eye of mine,” I said, pointing to my right eye. “Basically, I’m worried my eye might have done things to everyone while I was drunk...”

3

Let’s go back a few days, to 5 p.m. on January 10th. We met up outside the East Exit of Shinjuku Station in the plaza in front of Studio Alta.

I came out of the underground minutes before we were set to meet up, looked up, and saw Akari Seto waving to me from in front of

the plants up ahead.

“Senpai!”

“H-Hey.” I was caught off guard, and gave a half-hearted wave in response. Akari rushed over, sounding giddy as she spoke. “I’m looking forward to today! Thanks for the invite!”

“Uh, sure. Thanks for coming...” I nodded, unsure of what exactly she was looking forward to.

Akari was wearing a khaki blouson over her one-piece dress, an inoffensively cute ensemble. Behind her, Natsumi Ichikawa walked towards us lethargically. In contrast to Akari, she wore an oversized turtleneck that obscured the lines of her body, with straight denim jeans for a masculine look. With those lush eyelashes, she looked like she meant business.

“Yo,” Natsumi said.

“Hey—” I began.

“Sup.”

“Mm.” Seeing Natsumi unwilling to put in more than the bare minimum effort to communicate, I did likewise. This was actually easier on me. I wasn’t the cheerful, chatty type, so talking wore me out.

But just as I was thinking that, Akari exuberantly asked, “Do you go to love hotels often, Senpai?”

“Hell no!” That was a hell of a thing to ask in such an enthusiastic tone.

“Huh? When we were on the phone, I got the sense that you’d been to a love hotel before, but this was your first girls’ party... Sorry I jumped to conclusions.”

“N-No, never! I’ve never gone to one!”

I was mumbling a bit, but when you really think about it, I wasn’t lying. I mean, the only love hotels I’d been to before now were ruins. At the very least, I could still claim I had never been to one during business hours.

“Oh, you haven’t? Me either. It’ll be fun!” Akari said.

“Maybe it’s weird for me to say this when I’m the one who invited you, but I’m surprised you said yes so quickly.”

“Well, that’s because it was *you* inviting me, Senpai!”

“Uh, sure... So, um, you ever been to a love hotel, Natsumi?”

“Huh...? You’re seriously gonna ask?” She pulled back, like I had asked something abnormal, and I nearly snapped.

Huh? Say that to your buddy first.

But before I could retort, Akari grinned and slipped her arm through Natsumi’s. “Nattsun’s really been looking forward to it too.”

“Nuh-uh.”

“Liar. You’ve been wanting to go to a love hotel for ages, right?”

“To a girls’ party. A love hotel girls’ party,” Natsumi corrected Akari awkwardly.

“You have? Why?”

“Uh, it just seemed like fun.”

“But you never said a word about it until Senpai invited us.”

“Uh, well...”

“You could have invited me.”

“Uh, yeah, I dunno about that...” Natsumi turned an awkward glance in my direction. It felt like she was looking for me to bail her out, but it wasn’t my place to say anything, so I averted my eyes. That’s when I noticed a petite figure striding across the plaza towards us.

“Oh, Kozakura-san.”

“Hey.” She wore a long, white coat, gray slim-fit pants, and a short pair of high-heeled boots. Kozakura’s face was practically buried in her scarf, and she looked around the area with a scowl. She seemed grumpy, but what else was new?

“Lots of people here.”

“You said it.”

I normally avoided crowds, so I rarely came to places like this. I had chosen the plaza in front of Studio Alta because it was the go-to spot for meeting up near the East Exit of Shinjuku Station, but thinking about it later, I should have gone with the first floor of the Kinokuniya bookstore, or something like that. Everyone around us seemed so cheery...nothing like a loner like me.



“Kozakura-san! Long time no see!” Akari called out.

“Oh, Seto-chan. You seem well.”

“Sure am! Oh, right, this is a first. This is the friend I was telling you about—”

“Ichikawa-san, was it? We’ve met,” Kozakura said.

“Huh? When’d you two meet, Nattsun?”

“I went to her place to pick up Senpai’s vehicle, remember?” Natsumi said.

“Ohh, that’s when, huh?”

“Yeah. This is the first time we’ve talked properly, though,” Kozakura said.

“Thank you for being nice to Akari. Hope you’ll do the same for me.”

“This feels kind of weird. But, likewise.”

“Sure.”

I was agog as the two of them managed to have a relatively smooth conversation with Kozakura, even though she didn’t seem to be having an especially good time.

Huh...?

Feeling a little lonely, I tried to insert myself into the conversation. “Why did you come, Kozakura-san?”

“Huh...? Because you invited me, Sorawo-chan?”

“Uh, right. Thanks for the reminder.”

“You telling me to go home? Is that it?”

“N-No. I just thought you’d refuse, but you agreed to come so quickly. I was a little surprised.”

“I’ve been alone with nothing to do since New Year’s. And I’m tired of baking mochi at home.”

“Oh, I see... Well, I’m glad.”

“You better be grateful. So? Is this everyone?”

“We’re still missing Toriko.”

“She’s right there.”

“Huh...? Whoa!”

When I turned around, Toriko was standing right behind me, so I let out an involuntary cry of surprise. When did she get there...?!

Toriko ignored me as I froze up like a deer in the headlights and smiled at the other three. “Happy New Year.”

“Oh! That’s right. Happy New Year to you too!” Akari said.

“Happy New Year.”

“Yo.”

The other three each greeted her.

“Well, shall we get going?” Toriko asked.

“Oh...! Right. This way...” I refocused myself and started walking

to lead the way. Toriko came up beside me, but didn't look at me. She seemed dark today. Her heavy knitted sweater and tight ski-pants were both black. The white shirt poking out from underneath the sweater provided a stylish accent color.

We crossed the road and headed towards Kabukicho. When the human traffic pushed me a bit closer to Toriko, I took the chance to whisper to her. "You seem mad?"

Toriko finally looked at me. More like glared, actually. "So, I looked into it after that."

"Into what?"

"Girls' party plans."

"And?"

"We could have gone alone!"

"Oh..." I didn't know what to say. Toriko seemed indignant.

"Everywhere accepted reservations starting from two people!"

"Wh-What a surprise, huh?"

"You knew, didn't you, Sorawo?"

"U-Uh, about that..."

"Liar."

"I didn't lie. I genuinely didn't know at the time."

"..."

"It's true. It really is."

"But you had some idea we could go alone, right?"

"I told you, I didn't know."

Toriko gave me the resentful side-eye for a while, then turned away indignantly. "Fine, I get it. Let's just say you didn't know."

"I seriously didn't..."

"I'll make you pay for this." Toriko shut down my protest with that terrifying declaration.

Though I was leading the way, this was my first time in Kabukicho. I only knew it as the setting for games and anime, so I genuinely thought there might be yakuza with guns all over the place.

Now that I was actually here... No, it was nothing like that. There were signs for cabaret clubs and sex services all over the place, and some dodgy-looking individuals caught my eye, but there were far more ordinary folk. I saw quite a few groups of students about our age. Considering Toriko and I were both packing heat ourselves, maybe I wasn't in any position to complain about public order here.

Maybe because we were traveling in a group of five young women, but the stares we got from the pick-up artists and the solicitations were unpleasant. Toriko's pretty face already drew enough attention on its own. But any time one of those guys got it into their head to approach us, they had a sudden change of heart and backed away. I didn't get why at first, but after observing it a few

times, I figured it out. It was Kozakura. They probably didn't want the trouble that came with talking to a minor; Kozakura wasn't one, but she looked the part.

With Kozakura's protection, we were able to proceed deep inside Kabukicho without being accosted. The massive signs for host clubs, the limousines slowly turning around crowded corners, the specialty shops with dresses more gaudy than anything I had ever seen... There was so much that caught my eye on the way to where the love hotels were. Foot traffic dropped off, but the light from the buildings kept the streets bright.

Toriko had an inscrutable look on her face as she regarded the hotels we were passing. Kozakura wouldn't normally have come here, so it must have been an unusual experience for her too. Akari and Natsumi were pointing at different hotels, loudly shouting things like, "That one has a rock bath!" and "That one has morning service!" It was awkward as hell for the couples trying to go inside, so they could have stopped pointing at least.

The love hotel we were looking for was on the outskirts of the hotel area. It was a large hotel facing onto the main street. The facade of the building was stone (or aesthetic paneling designed to look like it, maybe) and used spotlights to give it a high-class image. The building was surrounded with greenery, exotic sculptures, and flowers, along with architecture that evoked the southern seas.

"Is this really a love hotel?" Toriko mumbled in shock. Her tone had gone back to normal.

Relieved, I responded, "It's like a theme park, huh?"

I had done my research before booking, so I wasn't surprised, but the place still made an impact when you saw it in person. The walls shielding the entrance from view were the barely love hotel-y thing about it, but even those walls were gaudy, covered as they were in ivy and colorful flowers.

"W-Well... Let's go on in."

"Okay."

I felt kind of tense as I passed through the entrance. The hallways were dark and narrow, and my shoulder brushed against Toriko's beside me.

Oh, I see. It was designed to make it natural for a couple to get a little closer.

I walked with my eyes on the floor, analyzing the situation as if it had nothing to do with me. I couldn't possibly have looked to my side. Once we were through the automatic door at the end of the hallway, it opened into a much more open area.

"Oh, wow!"

"Whoa, talk about flashy."

Akari and Natsumi spoke loudly from behind us. There were couches scattered around a lobby with dark-colored flooring, and lines of decorative plants as tall as a person. The space was softly illuminated with spotlights and indirect lighting, and a languid Balinese gamelan piece served as background music interspersed with the sounds of water and birdsong. Was this aroma foreign incense, perhaps?

“Seriously?! Is this how things are these days?!” Kozakura could hardly be blamed for her shocked reaction. The lobby was full of people, the majority of them groups of women. Many of them had come dressed up a little, eager to take part in a girls’ party. Some girls had oversized bags or suitcases too. There were a number of groups packed in here, each engaged in conversation. The busiest spot was the check-in counter. There was apparently a line. I’d always had a vague image of the front desk of love hotels as being hidden behind a privacy screen, but this place was like an ordinary hotel, with uniformed receptionists standing there handling check-in. No one seemed to think anything of it.

“I guess it’s true that love hotel girls’ parties are a thing these days...”

“You know, I’d underestimated it. I guess it never hurts to get out once in a while, huh?

While me and Kozakura were expressing our surprise, Toriko looked around wide-eyed.

“This is really a love hotel, right?” She’d asked the same thing before.

“This is the place. No doubt about it,” I reassured her.

“It’s nothing like I expected... This is practically a resort. And there’s so many people...”

“See, it doesn’t have *that* kind of vibe to it,” I blurted out.

“What do you mean, that kind of vibe?” Toriko immediately asked.

“...”

“What kind of vibe?”

“...”

“Sorawo?”

“Oh, hey! The counter’s open! I’m gonna go check in!” As I tried to hurry away, Toriko silently punched me in the arm.

When I moved, everyone followed, so we ended up checking in with all five of us there at the front desk. Just like when we went to taverns, Kozakura had to provide her driver’s license and prove her age. I was completely inured to it at this point, but to a stranger’s eyes, I might have looked like a malicious older girl trying to drag a minor into a hotel.

Things proceeded smoothly from there and we were given our room key. We took a walk around the lobby before heading to the room. There were shelves lined with shampoo, a buffet of free amenities, a refrigerator full of desserts and alcohol, an all-you-can-drink wine machine, a coffee machine... We each looked at the stuff we'd need, and some of the stuff we wouldn't particularly need, and then finally boarded the elevator.

Disembarking on the top floor, we walked down a hallway with a dark brown carpet, and unlocked the door to our room.

"Woah."

"Whaa."

"Hmm, I see."

"Wow!"

"It's huge."

As we entered, we each reacted with our own individual impressions. I had used the girls' party plan to reserve what I assume was probably the largest room in this hotel: the Royal Room. As you might expect from that name, it was large enough that, even with five people here, it didn't feel cramped.

The first thing to catch my eye inside this room that was decorated in earthy tones were two canopied double beds in the back. Hibiscus petals were scattered over the top of their white blankets.

Next to the wall there were two black leather massage chairs. In the front of the room was an L-shaped sofa and a wooden table. The table had a silver bucket of ice placed on top of it with a bottle of wine sticking out. Along the wall there was a mini-fridge, and a shelf with a microwave, and on top of that shelf was a large TV surrounded by a bamboo frame. It currently showed nature footage from Bali. There was the sound of the waves rolling in and out, and gamelan music played at a subdued volume.

"Lookie, lookie! There's a sauna!" Akari shouted, looking through the door to the side of us that she had opened. Beyond it was a washroom with a selection of amenities including face wash, face lotion, and face masks. Across from the sink was a large dry sauna that had room for two.

"Seriously? Sweet." Natsumi looked at the sauna over Akari's shoulder. Even the delinquent who usually had a sullen look on her face had been constantly surprised since we entered the hotel.

"Let's go in later, Nattsun."

"Mm."

...Those two sure are close.

Toriko walked in, pushing the bathroom door open. The tub was made of black stone, and was an almost round heart-shape, or maybe more of a peach-shape, and it was large enough it seemed to cry out

“get in me together.”

I thought this girls' party plan was good for up to six people, but looking at the massage chairs, the sauna, and some of the other facilities, they seemed to assume two guests, probably because this was a love hotel...

As I was thinking about that, Toriko turned to me, eyes sparkling. “Let's take a bath together later!”

“Uh... I-If I feel like it, sure,” I mumbled. Her eyes narrowed happily as she looked down at me, and I looked away.

What had gotten into her? Where did the Toriko who was afraid to go into the hot springs go?

Ever since Christmas, Toriko had grown oddly confident, and I was bewildered by how strongly she was coming on to me.

I mean, no, I get it. I'm not an idiot.

Toriko likes me that way.

But just because I understood what was going on didn't mean my own feelings could keep up with hers. At the hot springs, Toriko and I had both been cowards. Now, I was the only one.

I get it, but...

“The only normal thing here is the restroom, huh?” Kozakura commented with a laugh as she looked.

It was true. In the middle of this room where every nook and cranny had been decked out in Balinese-style, the small room with a simple washlet toilet managed to maintain some semblance of everyday life.

Having finished our tour of the facilities, we returned to the bedroom. We set down our bags, took off our jackets and hung them up in the closet, then sat down on the beds or the arm rests of the sofa to relax.

“So? What do people usually do at this point?” Kozakura asked. I didn't know either. Looking around, unsure what to say, my eyes fell on the bucket of ice sitting out on the table.

“Why don't we start with a toast?”

“Oh! I'll pour, Senpai!” Akari stood up, then opened the bottle of sparkling wine. The cork came out with a loud pop, and she began pouring the contents into the tall glasses.

We sat around the table, each raising our drinks. Everyone was looking my way, so I hurriedly said, “Uh, well... Cheers!”

“Cheers!” the four of them said in unison. I took a sip from my glass too. It was well-chilled; a sweet wine with a clean taste. I had downed it in no time and realized I was parched.

“You're supposed to have some witty remarks,” Kozakura grumbled. I hadn't had the presence of mind to do anything like that.

My internal struggles aside, our impromptu love hotel girls' party

was finally about to get underway.

4

“Hmm. As far as I can tell, nothing has changed about your eye,” said the doctor with the shaved head. This was DS Research’s medical facility. White light shone on a blown-up picture of my blue right eye posted on a board on the wall.

After talking to Migiwa in his room, I decided to take the opportunity to have them examine my right eye. I hadn’t done that since the time I got abducted by Runa Urumi’s cult, when I was worried about side-effects from the drugs they’d given me. It was pretty tough not focusing my mind on the doctor during the examination. This eye of mine drove people mad. In a way, it was like I was making him do maintenance on a loaded gun while staring down the barrel. I felt really bad about it.

Fortunately, it seemed images of my eye lacked the power to cause insanity. The doctor stared at the picture for a moment, then turned back to me.

“So, you say you drank so much you lost your memory?”

“Yes.”

“And you’re concerned you may have done something you’ll regret during that time?”

“Yes...”

Migiwa, who had accompanied me to the examination room, spoke up. “Do you have any idea what it might have been? Is there something you suspect you did during the period you have no recollection of?”

“Uh... Well, the most likely thing is that I accidentally looked at someone with my right eye while I was drunk, and that drove them nuts.”

I didn’t like thinking about it, but that was the most probable. Something incredibly awkward must have happened. If that wasn’t it, someone would have been willing to tell me something.

“That’s never happened before, but if there’s no indication that my right eye’s influence has gotten stronger...”

“On a purely physical level, it’s no different from the last time I examined you,” the doctor said.

“Then...was it the alcohol?”

“I don’t think we can say that for sure, but what you did was like drinking with a gun in your hand. It’s certainly dangerous.”

“Y-Yeah...” As I was responding, I got the feeling we had swung around actual guns while intoxicated a number of times before, and I trailed off awkwardly.

“How much do you usually drink? Has it gone up? Are you drinking every day?”

“Not at all. I don’t drink alone.”

“Do you have any medication you take regularly?”

“Not really. I’m actually pretty healthy.”

“Would it be a problem if I asked you to take a urine test?”

“Huh? That doesn’t really bother me...”

The doctor looked over my shoulder and made eye contact with Migiwa.

“What is it?” Migiwa asked.

“If you set aside her right eye, she’s the picture of health.”

“Ah.”

...Oh, I get it. He suspected narcotics, huh?

“There are all sorts of things that can cause a person to lose their senses, after all... Alcohol and drugs are easy examples, but you can fall into a state of panic when you’re subject to a sudden act of violence or a disaster, and the excitement of being in a group can cause you to lose control. Sexual stimulation, religious fervor, trance-states induced by music or dancing...”

The doctor counted them off on his fingers while looking at me with probing eyes.

“If you just drank too much, then all you need to do is know your limits and be smart about it, but it’s also possible there was another factor involved. You’re sure you don’t remember what happened?”

I put my hands on my face and closed my eyes, focusing as I searched through my memories.

“I do remember, up to a certain point. But that’s all...”

I hadn’t forgotten absolutely everything. I had clear memories up until a certain point.

Yes, the girls’ party started with us ordering room service...

5

“Sorawo, honey toast. Let’s order the honey toast,” Toriko said.

“It’s a full loaf. You know that, right?”

“There’s five of us. It’ll disappear.”

“You better eat your share,” Kozakura warned her.

“Don’t count on me to help,” Akari said.

This hotel’s most famous dish was honey toast: an entire loaf of bread topped with ice cream and chocolate sauce. It was a real calorie monster.

“Why would they go to all the trouble of decking the place out in Balinese style, then go and push honey toast, of all things?” I asked, but Toriko had a simple answer.

"It's honey in Bali, right?"

"Wait... That's it?! Because they rhyme?!"

"Never thought of that," Kozakura agreed.

"Want to order some other stuff with it, Senpai? We already drank the entire bottle."

"Oh, yeah. We should, huh? Let me know if there's anything you all want."

We sat down on the two beds, sticking our heads close together to look at the food and drink menu.

"Looks like it's not all Balinese," I pointed out. "I mean, there's sweet potato shochu."

"Yeah, like, roast beef with a hot spring egg on top? That's not even ethnic cuisine," Toriko said.

"Oh! I want that."

"That's tavern food. You sure, Akari?"

"Huh? Should I not get it, Nattsun?"

"Well... We don't come to this kind of place every day. Why not get something that fits the mood?"

"Oh, you're the type who cares about the mood, Ichikawa-san? Good," Kozakura said.

"Huh? Something weird about that?"

"I'm glad someone here is normal. What a relief."

"You okay, Kozakura-san? Are you tired?"

It looked like we were supposed to order using the TV remote. It was impossible to keep track of who wanted what with five people here, so I gave up and just punched in whatever anyone said like I was some kind of ordering machine.

"Is that good for food? Okay, on to desserts..." Toriko said.

When Toriko said that, I obviously stopped. "We've already got honey toast coming, and you *still* want more sweet stuff?"

"There's no need to order everything at once," Kozakura cautioned her. "It won't all fit on the table."

"Aww, okay. It can wait," Toriko said, looking unhappy, but backed down.

"Anyone else? We're good, right? Okay, I'm putting in the order." I sent the order, then set down the remote. "There's a lot coming, so it may take a while."

"What do we do until then?"

"Huh? Uh... I dunno," I answered Toriko honestly despite myself. It wasn't like I had any idea what you were supposed to do at a girls' party. Just putting together a group took everything I had. I figured we'd get some booze and snacks in us, then do whatever seemed like fun to kill time, but that was all I could come up with.

While I was still flustered, Akari's hand shot up. "Oh! In that case,

I wanted to ask, when was everyone planning on using the bath?"

"When? What do you mean?" I asked.

"We're staying the night, so everyone's going to take a bath, right? But it's not exactly huge, you know?"

"Yeah, it'll fit two at a time, at most." Toriko was quick to jump in. I was getting more and more worried. "You'll be getting in with Natsumi, right, Akari?"

"Is that okay?"

"Yeah, because I'll be getting in with Sorawo," Toriko said without a moment's hesitation, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

Wh-Why you...

"Wow, you're all so close," Kozakura said in exasperation, then walked over to plop herself down in one of the massage chairs.

"I-If you'd like, you could join u—"

"I think I'll take mine in the morning. Leisurely, without anyone to bother me," Kozakura said curtly. She turned on the massage chair, then continued, "If you're going to be using the bath or sauna, don't wait until you're falling down drunk. You could die."

"Oh, uh, Toriko. You know, I've been drinking..."

"Not that much. You'll be fine once you sober up a bit."

"U-Uh..."

"Let's save any more drinks for after our bath."

"Well, okay..."

"Sorawo-chan, pass the remote," Kozakura said.

"Uh! Okay!" I passed the TV remote to Kozakura, who was enjoying the gentle vibration of the massage chair. Kozakura pressed some buttons and pulled up the channel guide.

"Should I put something on? There are movies on here. Anything you want to see?"

"Hmm. There's porn too, huh?" said Toriko, of all people. I fell into a panic.

"Well, duh," Kozakura replied. "This is a love hotel."

"You wanna watch some, Nishina-senpai?"

"Hmm, I'll pass."

Then why bring it up?!

"Anything you want, Ichikawa-san?"

"Um, what's the name of that thing that was playing when we first got here?" Natsumi asked.

"Oh, you mean that screen saver thing?" Kozakura clarified.

"Uh, yeah. I kinda liked it. Can't we stick with that?"

"You sure? I don't mind. Yeah, okay, let's keep the Balinese vibe going."

The Balinese scenery video that had been playing by default when

we arrived came back on. The sound of waves...of bamboo wind chimes...of croaking frogs... *Thanks, Natsumi.* I dunno why, but I was overcome with a feeling of gratitude.

“So, what’d everyone bring from downstairs?” Akari asked. “I went and grabbed every kind of bath salt they had.”

“How many baths’re you planning on taking?” Natsumi asked.

“There was a sign that said ‘try blending them yourself,’ remember?”

“If you mix them all together, won’t they just average out?”

“What is average for bath salts anyway?”

“What’d you bring, Sorawo?” Toriko asked me.

“Me...? I just ended up grabbing some dried fruits.” I’d been holding them all this time. When I showed Toriko the dried fruits that were wrapped like candy, Toriko laughed out loud.

“You hungry?” she asked.

“I wanted some sugar intake.”

“I get you. I mean, I brought pudding.”

“Looks like you were way hungrier than me...”

“That lobby was really something, huh? And not just the amenities. They had wine, and soup, and pickled plums, all for free.”

“It said there was a spa here too.”

“Ohh, that’s kind of appealing. Maybe we should check it out before we head home tomorrow?”

“If the lobby’s that crowded, we should probably make a reservation.”

“If it were a bit quieter, I’d want to live here,” Kozakura interjected. “It’s big, and they’ve got everything.”

“Your house is bigger though, isn’t it, Kozakura-san? Why not give it a Balinese-style makeover?” I asked.

“You idiot. That’s not what I meant.”

As we were chatting, I slowly loosened up.

Yeah, now that I calm down and think about it, there’s five people here. Toriko can’t try anything funny. That’s why I got everyone together to begin with. We’ve bathed together before. Yeah, it’s just a bath, that’s all! Get it together!

Then, just as I was rebuking myself... *Ding dong*, the doorbell rang.

“Oh, they’re here. That was fast, huh?” Akari got up and raced to the door. “Comiiing!”

“Sorry for the wait. It’s room service.”

“I’m opening up nooow!”

I could hear Akari and the hotel staff conversing at the door.

“Sorawo,” Toriko said, noticing how I was acting. “You okay?”

“Yeah...” I let out the breath I had been holding. Hearing the doorbell in a love hotel, I’d flashed back to what had happened in the

ruined one. Toriko tried to place a concerned arm around my shoulders, but I shook my head to tell her I was fine.

“Pardon me.” A female member of the hotel staff pushed a silver cart into the room. She was not the Red Person, obviously. It was a normal, sane human being. “I’m sorry. Because of the volume of your order, we’ll be bringing it up in batches.”

“Oh! No, that’s no problem at all,” Akari said.

Our order was laid out on the table. Roast beef, ham, cheese, smoked salmon carpaccio. It looked like they’d sent the stuff that was quickest to prepare up early. There was also a cocktail someone had ordered, a bunch of cans of Indonesian beer, and finally the loaf of honey toast came down with an audible thud.

“You can use the refrigerator and microwave, so, please, enjoy the food at your leisure. We will bring up the rest of your order later.”

The woman left, closing the door behind her. A hush fell over all of us as we looked down at the stupidly huge honey toast.

“Well, uh... I guess we better get started on this thing.”

“It’s probably better while it’s still warm.”

The suddenly much quieter group gathered around the sofa set, and set to work on that mass of calories.

6

There were five of us, so I didn’t end up as stuffed as I’d feared, but for the first thing we had at a drinking party, the honey toast had been too heavy, and too sweet. It was a good thing I’d come hungry. Kozakura was as good as her word and didn’t do much to contribute, but Akari and I gave it our best effort. Natsumi ate so little she barely even counted.

“Phew... Toriko, did you eat your share?” I asked.

“Yeah, I sure did. It was delicious.”

“Is that really true...?”

“She does seem to be putting on an awfully calm face,” Akari agreed.

“I feel like she was just eating the ice cream on top,” Kozakura interjected.

“See, I knew it!”

“Hey, hey, don’t worry about it,” Toriko tried to mollify us.

“You’ve all finished your drinks, right? Let’s have another toast.”

“Whose is this one, with the orange and... blackcurrant?” Akari asked.

“That’s mine,” said Natsumi. “Pass it here.”

“Everyone else ordered beer, huh?” Kozakura noted.

“Which’s yours, Toriko?”

"The Bintang."

"I had one of those too," Kozakura said.

"Well, I guess these must be for Senpai and me. Bali-hai?"

"Yeah, I'll pass around the bottle-opener," I said.

We opened all the bottles and had another toast of the not-bread variety; there was a loud clinking of bottles. We each filled our own plate with snacks, and then took up positions on the sofa, beds, or massage chairs. I was on the sofa, and Toriko was next to me. We carried on chatting about random inoffensive topics like "What do you think of your first Indonesian beer?" and "What were you doing on New Year's?" and "What New Year's sales did you check out?" But then, as if she had suddenly remembered it, Natsumi spoke up.

"Come to think of it, why'd you invite us to tag along, Kamikoshi-senpai?"

"Uh, well, it just ended up this way..."

"How?"

"Like, to thank Akari for that time she put me up for the night."

"Ohh. What was up with that anyway? You only stayed for one night. Everything work out okay?"

I left after one night because you clearly didn't want me there!

"It's fine. The problem got sorted out."

"Oh, yeah?"

As we talked, Akari clearly couldn't restrain herself any longer. "Um, Senpai, how are things recently... You know, with *that* stuff?" she asked.

"Bwuh!" Natsumi choked on her drink for some reason.

"Wh...What are you asking out of nowhere?"

"Huh? Why not?"

"I mean... Should you be asking? About that kind of thing."

"Well, when else am I going to get the chance to?"

I instantly knew what she meant by *that* stuff. This girl had the misconception that Toriko and I were "specialists" on the supernatural, sticking our noses into all sorts of strange and mysterious situations, and she was always looking for a chance to ask about it.

I always just said whatever and dodged the issue. The other world was just for me and Toriko. Akari and Natsumi had been caught up in the Ninja Cats and Sannukikano incidents, but I had no intention of telling them there was more beyond the interstitial space.

"Well, we're still plugging away, I guess," I gave a vague reply between bites of ham.

"Were there any new developments after that?"

"Developments?"

"Won't you tell me, Senpai? I've always wanted to hear about this

stuff from you in detail. What is it that you and Toriko-san do all the time?"

For some reason, Natsumi looked back and forth between Akari and me, and seemed nervous.

"After that... The night after I left your place, I stayed with Kozakura-san..."

"Hey! Don't talk about anything too weird!" Kozakura interjected, her wariness readily apparent.

Oh, right. I guess I shouldn't tell any scary stories. That makes this tough.

Choosing my words carefully, so as not to scare Kozakura, I said, "After Kozakura-san had gone to sleep, Toriko came..."

"Huh?!" Natsumi's eyes bugged out.

Oh, put a sock in it.

"And so I went back to my place with her. There was, uh...some trouble in my room, so we sorted that out..."

"That trouble was the reason you came to stay at my place, right, Senpai? What happened?"

Caught between Akari's look of rapt attention, and a glare from Kozakura that said "go into detail and I will murder you," I desperately flailed for a way to explain it.

"It was trouble with noise, I guess you could say."

"Strange noises from the room next door, or something like that?"

"Uh, yeah, more or less. The walls are thin."

"Huh? So they could hear what's going on in your room too, Senpai?"

"Yeah, that might've been the bigger problem."

"Ohh... I see how it was," Natsumi mumbled a tone somewhere between being satisfied with and dumbfounded by an answer.

What's with her? What does she think she gets?

"Did anything happen after that?"

"We went to the hot springs." It was Toriko who answered this time.

"The hot springs! Nice. Where did you go?"

"Chichibu."

"Just the two of you?"

"Nah, it was the three of us. Right, Kozakura?"

"They'd be too lonely by themselves, so they dragged me along. Even after I repeatedly refused... You should be careful, Seto-chan, Ichikawa-san. These two get people caught up in things."

"But you enjoyed it, Kozakura!" Toriko said.

"In the end, yes."

"Oh... Uh... So that's how it was..." Natsumi mumbled, looking completely defanged.

What's been with her for the last little while?

"Anything else? Did anything else happen?" Akari asked.

"Anything else, huh..."

I thought for a moment, deciding how to answer the enthusiastic Akari, when Toriko just casually said:

"I went to a love hotel with Sorawo on Christmas Eve."

I spewed a mouthful of beer. "To...Toriko!!!"

"What? It's a fact, isn't it?" Toriko gave me a defiant look. Akari and Natsumi looked at us, wide-eyed.

"Is *that* what you two were up to then?" Kozakura looked weirded out, so I hurriedly shook my head.

"No! It's not like that! It was a ruin! An abandoned love hotel!"

"An abandoned love hotel...on Christmas Eve?" Akari asked.

"Y-Yeah! You know how I love exploring ruins, right?"

"And you stayed the night?" Natsumi asked.

"Y-Yeah..."

"Are you for real...?" Natsumi looked at me like I was a crazy person. "That's trespassing, isn't it?"

"Wh-What was it like? Anything weird happen?" Akari asked.

"Uh, yeah... A fair bit..."

"Seto-chan, don't ask any more. And you, Sorawo-chan, not another word. I don't want to hear it," Kozakura said in a firm tone, and I shut my mouth.

"Uh, sorry. I didn't mean to take the conversation in this kind of direction. Aha ha," Akari said with a bewildered laugh. A strange silence fell over the room. I couldn't take anymore of this, so I knocked back my drink, and polished the rest off in one go.

"Kozakura-san, pass the remote. I'm ordering more."

"Uh... Here you go."

"Thanks."

As I took the remote, and started plugging in my order, Toriko, looking worried, said, "Hey, Sorawo, if you drink too much, you won't be able to get in the bath."

"Hmm? It can wait until morning, can't it?" I answered, a stupid grin on my face.

"Oh, w-well, do you mind if we take the first bath, then? I think I'll be too drunk if I have any more to drink," Akari said. I nodded at her.

You go right ahead. Take off wherever you want.

"Okay, Nattsun, let's go then."

"Yeah... I'm getting sweaty for some reason."

"See ya." I waved to Akari and Natsumi as they rose from their seats.

This is where my memory starts to get fuzzy.

When room service came for the second time, they had my extra drinks and the second round of food. There was chicken satay served in curry and peanut sauce, a Korean pancake with fresh seafood and onions, a platter of fried foods, and an Indonesian-style fried rice dish called nasi goreng... I think that was about it. We had a fridge, so I'd ordered a bunch of beers all at once. I was drinking them pretty quickly, in a hurry to get sloshed. I figured it would get me out of taking a bath.

"So, just how much do those two know, again?" Kozakura asked. She had moved from her massage chair to go occupy half a bed. In the bath, happy laughter echoed.

"I haven't told them anything about the Otherside."

"Ichikawa-san, too?"

"She should know even less than Akari. She just thinks I'm some sort of spirit medium, or something."

"She's not far off the mark, really."

"You think those two are going out?" Toriko asked, head cocked to the side.

"Hmm, I don't know about that. They're childhood friends, right? I went to an all-girls school. There were lots of pairs like them who'd been friends forever, and seemed practically inseparable."

"Really? They look really close to me."

I hugged a cushion as Toriko and Kozakura talked, just pouring more and more beer down my gullet.

"There's a difference between being close and actually dating... I'd bet they aren't. I'm as confident they aren't as that you two aren't."

"We aren't? What makes you say that?"

Kozakura snorted at Toriko's question, then motioned towards me with the bottle in her hand.

"One look at how hopeless Sorawo is is all it takes."

"Lay off, would you?" I grumbled.

I could handle it if it was just Toriko, but if others started seeing us that way, it would be really awkward.

Were we going out, or not? I felt like that kind of question tried to force our relationship into a box. Toriko was apparently in love with me. Since she'd come out and said it so clearly, I had no choice but to accept that she did. I loved her too. But did I love her the same way she loved me? Honestly, I don't know.

This was all because I was such a child. I'm sure everyone else must have understood these things better than me, and been able to talk about them using mature words.

Well, whatever. They could leave me out of it, and go enjoy their gossip about romance and things far more indecent. It was no fun for me at all.

Hmph.

As I petulantly kept drinking, my mind got hazier and hazier.

I listened idly as Toriko explained, in a roundabout way, what had happened during our expedition on Christmas Eve. If you left out the kudans and the Red Person, it just sounded like we went out to have a good time. Maybe we did. Though we had some scary encounters along the way, really, all Toriko and I wanted was to explore...

I tried to use my chopsticks to grab a piece of chicken karaage, but I dropped them, so I gave up and grabbed it with my bare hands. Toriko turned and looked at me with concern.

"Hey, Sorawo, you might want to try drinking something non-alcoholic too."

"Hmm? I'm fine, I'm fine."

"Your face looks pretty red."

"It's no big deal. *It's okay*," I told her, slipping in some English.

"*You're definitely not okay.*"

"What? Don't use difficult words."

"Sheesh. Come on, pass the remote."

I watched in a daze as Toriko's pale fingers clicked the remote to order some soft drinks. The door to the bathroom opened, and Akari loudly asked, "Did someone just come over here?"

"Nobody's been over there," Toriko shouted back.

"Huh? Okay then. Sorry to bother you," Akari replied, then closed the door.

"What was that about?" Kozakura asked, suspicious. I had no clue so I just shook my head.

At some point, the nature footage on the TV had moved from the shore to a temple at night. The half-naked men, their skin red in the glow of the candles, swayed as they sang rounds with a unique rhythm. Was it a type of kecak? I'd heard somewhere it was supposed to represent the croaking of frogs. And now that I'd thought about that, I couldn't hear it as anything else. Funny how that works.

Some time later, Akari and Natsumi emerged from the bathroom wearing a pair of bathrobes.

"Phew. That felt good," Akari said.

"Want a beer? I ordered more," I said.

"Wow, I could go for a cold one right after a bath!"

"Kids these days can just drink beer normally, huh? Back when I started drinking in university, I didn't really like the taste," Kozakura commented.

"I'd usually have a lemon sour, but you don't get foreign beer every day. Nattsun, you want the same thing as before?"

"Mm..."

"What were you shouting about earlier?" Toriko asked.

Akari took a swig of her beer. "When we were in the bath, it felt like there was someone at the door, peeping on us."

"Huh? The three of us have been over here the whole time."

"I know, right? The height didn't match, either, so I must've imagined it."

"The...height?" Toriko said.

"They were taller than the door, with jet black hair, and a pale white face."

"Wh-Whoa, hold up! What are you saying?!" Kozakura jumped up in bed.

"Nah, I probably just imagined it. For a moment, I thought I saw a ghost of a woman in white clothes with long hair, but that's way too cliché to have actually happened..."

"I don't care if it's cliché or not! Don't talk about creepy stuff like that!" Kozakura cried out.

"S-Sorry. It was a mistake! A mistake! You never saw anything, right, Nattsun?"

"Mm... I never *saw* anything."

"What's *that* supposed to imply?! You're scaring me!" Kozakura shouted, terrified.

Toriko gave me a quizzical look. It seemed like she expected me to have an opinion, so I said, "Maybe it's the Pontianak?"

Maybe it was all the alcohol, but my head was starting to hurt. I felt hot and woozy. I took off my top layer of clothing, then opened up the neck of my shirt to let some air in. On the TV, dancers with gold accessories swayed to the undulating rhythm of kecak music.

"Pon...?" Toriko echoed.

"Pontianak. It's a folktale from Indonesia, Malaysia, and that general area. She's something like a ghost or a spirit."

"Is that net lore?" Akari asked.

"Nah. The story's been around a long time. But I recall...uh, where was it again...? Singapore, maybe? I think that I remember reading a report online from someone over there who said they'd encountered her."

"What would she be doing here...?" Toriko asked. "Is it because of this place's Balinese theme?"

"How should I know?" I replied.

"So, is she dangerous?" Akari asked.

"I remember that if you talked to her, or touched her, you needed to have an exorcism done, or you were in trouble. But you guys didn't talk to her, so you're probably good."

When I said that, Natsumi raised her hand awkwardly. "Um, I didn't talk to her, but..she might've touched me."

"Huh? When?" Akari asked.

“Remember, I was telling you in the sauna? It felt like someone tapped me on the shoulder from behind. If it was just once, I’d think I imagined it, but I felt it four times...”

“Uh, oh. That’s no good. It’s a sign you’re being called to the afterlife. Since four is pronounced the same as death in Chinese too.” Even as I was mystified as to why I was saying all this, I carried on with absolute confidence. I’m less sure about how coherent I was, though.

“Senpai...?” Akari said.

“H-Hey, are you drunk?”

“You sure you’re okay, Sorawo? You wanna lie down?” Toriko asked.

“Wh-Whaddaya think we should do with her?” Natsumi questioned.

“It’s fine! I’ll take care of this. Leave it to me.”

Ding dong, the doorbell rang. Everyone but me jumped a little, turning to look towards the door. I was unfazed. My head was fuzzy with alcohol and I knew that it was room service.

“They’re here! Relax! It’s room service!” I pointed to the door and it opened on its own.

The gamelan music and the singing grew louder.

Voices rose in terror and shock.

“See?” I said when I saw what was at the door.

I can’t recall what happened after that.

7

“What came in?” Migiwa asked, and I diligently probed my memory. It was no use, though. I couldn’t remember a thing.

“The next thing I knew, it was morning, so...?”

“So no harm was done, then?” the doctor asked.

“That’s what I’m thinking. Nothing happened to Akari or Natsumi, and no one else had seen the Pontianak or whatever it was.”

“From what you’ve told us, it seems likely that something abnormal was already happening at the point where your memory cuts out. Could you have entered the UBL?”

“Hmm. If we went to the other world, I think that would have sobered me up. Everyone would have made a fuss about it too.” Kozakura would have been especially noisy, and Akari would have been super excited. But there had been no sign of that.

“If we did go somewhere, I don’t think it was any deeper than the interstitial space. But, honestly, I’m not sure. I may have just been drunk, and if you told me I just dreamed it, I’d probably think so too.”

The time we encountered the mannequins at the hot springs in

Chichibu, it was hard to distinguish what was real and what was a dream. But there was some physical evidence left behind, so I could convince myself something had really happened. This time, not so much. The only lingering evidence was the awkwardness I felt around everyone else.

"If you really cannot remember...would you like me to ask about it?" Migiwa offered.

"Huh? Ask who?"

"Kozakura-san. Even if she was not willing to tell you directly, she might be open to telling an unrelated third party."

"You...could be right about that."

"You don't mind? Then, if you will excuse me..."

As I watched Migiwa call Kozakura on his cell phone, I wondered again what kind of relationship they had. They seemed to have known each other for quite some time, but they came from different worlds, so it felt strange for them to be so close.

"Hello? This is Migiwa speaking. Do you have a moment? Thank you kindly. This may be rude of me, but I have a question for you. Yes. Kamikoshi-san came to me for advice, and it made me curious as well, yes. Yes. Haha. I see. Hahaha. Oh, no. I understand. Not at all. Think nothing of it. Oh, about that. You see—"

Migiwa carried on like that for a while, then looked down at me and handed me the phone.

"Huh?"

"She asked to speak with you directly."

I took the phone as directed, and pressed it to my ear. "Hello?"

On the other end, Kozakura sighed. "Sorawo-chan... You really don't remember anything?"

"N-No."

"..."

"Um... Did I do something?"

"..."

Unable to bear the silence, I spoke up. "I'm sorry. I must have really messed up, right? I know I was pretty drunk, so sorry, I really —"

"Sorawo-chan."

"Yes?"

"Do you remember when the lion dancers came in?"

"Uh?" My brain froze up at the unexpected term.

"Lion dancers? You mean, like, for New Year's?" I was confused. Kozakura sighed again—this time, it was as if she was trying to calm herself down.

"Now listen... To tell you the truth, I don't really understand what happened either. I don't think anyone there does. But... Something

very weird happened. That's for sure."

"O-Okay."

"My own memories are a mess, and I'm not sure I can explain it all that well. I think it was around the time Seto-chan and Ichikawa-san got out of the bath. There'd been something in the sauna... No, that's not it, you said room service had arrived, if I remember right. Then the door suddenly opened, and—"

As I listened to Kozakura's disjointed account, suddenly, a vivid image flashed through my mind. The large, four-legged shadow danced through the door. Its face was red, its eyes big, round, and wide open. The large mouth bared its fangs. It wore an ornate golden crown, its body was covered in white fur, and it kicked its legs up excited as it danced.

"A lion dancer!" I shouted. "I remember now! There definitely was a lion dancer that came in!"

"It came in, yeah."

It hadn't been the red and green shishimai lion dancer of Japan with gnashing teeth. The colors and shape had been different, but it was definitely something like a lion dancer that had come in. But all I'd managed to remember was that scene. It was a flashback devoid of context.

What was that about?

"The lion dancer came in, and then...uh, what happened again?"

"..." This time the silence lasted longer than before.

"Um...?"

"Do you...really want to know?" Kozakura's tone was more grave than I'd ever heard.

"Yeah, I kinda do."

"Yeah... Well, of course you would."

"Did I do something that awful?"

"I don't know if I'd call it awful..." Kozakura paused, then finally seemed to give up. "The lion dancer came in, and everyone screamed. It was total chaos."

"Yeah, I imagine it was."

"Then you stripped off all your clothes."

"Uh?"

"You got up, and just sorta...started dancing in front of the lion dancer. In the nude. To the beat of the music."

"...Is that really true?"

"I wouldn't lie to you about something like this."

"I was...pretty drunk, huh?"

"No, I think there's more to it than that. You were acting a little crazy. Like you were in some sort of trance."

I just stayed silent and listened to Kozakura, unable to process all

the information I was receiving.

"Then you spoke to us, in a lower, more attractive voice than usual. Saying things like, *'If you come with me, it'll be fine,'* and, *'I'll look after all of you.'*"

"I...I did?!"

"There was something in your eyes that was different from normal, like you'd had a complete change of personality. I don't think just getting drunk would let you dance like that. The lion dancer started dancing in response to you too. It was like there was an established formula, and you two were following it. It was an awfully intricate dance both you and the lion dancer were doing."

I don't remember any of this...

"Then, after that... This part is hard to explain, but...all of us, the people watching, we got excited."

"Excited?"

"Yeah... I think we'd all gone crazy. Thinking back on it, we were probably pulled into the same trance state that you were in."

"Crazy how?"

"...Everyone got naked."

"..."

"My memory is fragmented, but we all surrounded you and the lion dancer, singing, calling out, and started dancing excitedly. While we were doing it, it never occurred to me how crazy it all was."

"S-So, what happened next...?"

"We made a lot of noise, had a lot of fun...and the next thing I knew, it was morning. The lion dancer was gone. The four of us woke up first, but you were sound asleep. Everyone was buck naked."

"I...I see..."

"I was confused, so I focused on covering myself up. We all tried to remember what had happened, and then at some point you woke up. But when we tried to talk with you, you seemed out of it. Toriko said she was taking you to the bath, so we left you to her."

"Oh..." I had another flashback.

Toriko and I were soaking in a tub meant for two. It was pretty, with hibiscus petals floating on the surface of the water. A flower bath, I guess they call it? There was a sweet smell in the air. Toriko seemed weirded out by something, and she was hanging her head a little. There was this distance between us. I felt a warm fuzzy feeling, and a sense of loneliness as I gazed at the steam rising off the water...

"You got out of the tub, and as we were preparing to go, your responses started to get more lucid. It seemed like you didn't remember much, so the rest of us talked, and we agreed that, as far as we were concerned, nothing happened."

"..."

“Sorry. We didn’t know how to react to what had happened, and if you’d forgotten about it, we figured it was best to leave it that way.”

“...”

“That’s all I can tell you. You heard enough?”

“...”

“Uh, well, I’m hanging up now. If anything seems weird, have them examine you, okay?” Kozakura hung up. I passed the phone back to Migiwa, still in a daze.

“Did you figure anything out?”

I was silent for a while, then I bowed my head to Migiwa and the doctor. “Sorry. Please forget all about this...”

8

“Though I do not know what the situation was, I am glad to hear you managed to find some sort of resolution.”

“I don’t know if I’d call it resolved, but... Well, anyway, sorry for the trouble. Really. I shouldn’t have wasted your time.”

“Oh, not at all. If anything else comes up, please, do come to us for advice.”

“That means physically too,” the doctor added. “Tell us if anything seems wrong.”

“Thank you. Well, I think that’s it for today...” As I rose from my seat, the doctor seemed to remember something.

“Come to think of it, Migiwa. Have you two already talked about her?”

“Oh, no, not yet...”

“Her?” I asked, and Migiwa’s face grew serious.

“To be honest, I meant to tell you about this when Nishina-san came with you.”

“About what?”

“Runa Urumi has regained consciousness.”

Runa Urumi. She was a dangerous Satsuki Uruma fangirl and a Fourth Kind. She was the head of a cult she’d built using her voice, which lets her dominate minds. She’d been in a coma ever since Satsuki Uruma took her down.

When Migiwa asked if I wanted to see her, it took me a while to sort out what I wanted to do. Runa Urumi had been an enemy—even if I’d saved her on the spur of the moment. Maybe I said yes because I was curious to see what she was thinking after having nearly been killed by the object of her obsession.

Runa Urumi was being held in the deepest room of a medical facility that housed Fourth Kinds. When I peered through the thick glass window, I could see the back of her pale blue patient garb

turned towards me. The room was completely soundproofed, so that the staff couldn't be influenced by her voice. And yet despite that, as I approached, she turned as though she had heard my footsteps. She had a mirror in her hands. It seemed she was looking at her own face.

There were jagged stitches on both her cheeks. I was surprised—the scars stood out more than I'd expected. When she had been nearly killed by Satsuki Uruma, Runa's mouth had opened so wide her jaw was dislocated... Thinking back, her jaw might have been nearly torn off. That was going to tear her cheeks, yeah. Yikes, it looked painful...

I don't know if she was reacting to the expression on my face, but Runa brought her index fingers to her cheeks, and grinned. Then moved her mouth in an exaggerated fashion to say something.

I could read her lips. They said:

Am I pretty?

File 17: Looking at the Past in the Diagonal Mirror

1

The university Toriko attended was right by Yotsuya Station on the Chuo Line.

“Man, the station’s close!”

That was the first thing that surprised me; it was way different from my university on the outskirts of Saitama. Mine was a thirty-minute walk from the station. Having never seen a campus in the inner city before, I was walking around like a gaping yokel. When I realized how I must’ve looked, I hurriedly pulled my expression into a tight line. If I acted like such an outsider, the guards were going to ask me what I was doing there.

Still, there wasn’t much to worry about. The gate that led on to the main street was wide open and no one asked to see student ID at the entrance.

It was Tuesday. Just a perfectly ordinary day of the week. It was almost noon, so there were a lot of people walking around. I blended into the crowd, effortlessly infiltrating the campus.

I looked at the people passing by as I walked down a road with a neat row of buildings. I felt like a lot of them were kind of stylish, but I probably didn’t stand out too badly, I think. I had put the color contact in my right eye—for once—so I wouldn’t stand out in a bad way, at least.

“She just had to make this difficult...”

It had been two weeks since the love hotel girls’ party. I hadn’t been able to get in touch since, so I’d come to see her at school.

She wasn’t dead, at least. My messages were getting marked as read.

I didn’t know exactly why she was incommunicado. The only thing that came to mind was the naked dancing during the party. It would be understandable if I felt so awkward I broke off contact after performing some variation of the Barong dance in the nude while drunk and tripping on gamelan music, but what did Toriko have to feel awkward about? I was the one who’d humiliated myself.

That’s right—it occurred to me later, but the dance I was performing was probably the Barong dance. It’s a traditional dance

from Bali, said to represent the eternal battle between good and evil. That meant the “lion dancer” who had barged in on us was the holy beast Barong, and as the one dancing with him, that made me the embodiment of evil—the witch named Rangda.

What the heck? How was I the embodiment of evil? How was traveling to check on my friend, who I was worried about because I couldn’t get in contact with her, anything other than an act of good? Give me a break, okay?

Setting that aside, while I knew where she lived, the last time I went there I’d run into the Time-space Man, and it had been a serious headache, so I was a little hesitant to go over there. While I was debating what to do, I remembered Toriko complaining about having two back-to-back compulsory lectures on Tuesday mornings. That meant there was a good chance of her being at school this time of day.

That was what brought me here, but...

Okay, now where is she? I thought as I walked among the other students.

Two lectures, back-to-back, in the morning. After that much thinking, a person tends to get hungry. Toriko was no exception to that; if anything, it was even more likely with her. I could be pretty sure she’d grab lunch somewhere on campus.

I’d read up on places to eat on campus during the train ride here. Two cafeterias, and two cafés, I think? Oh, and a convenience store too. If I went to one of them, I might find Toriko. Not knowing the area personally, I decided to just try at random.

The convenience store was closest, so I peeked inside. Confirming Toriko wasn’t there, I then moved on to the nearest café. I followed the map, and it turned out to be a take-out place selling crepes and sandwiches.

“Huh?” I just stood there, in front of the store.

Well, this wasn’t good. I had assumed Toriko would be sitting down somewhere to eat, so I never considered the possibility of take-out. If she was eating in an empty classroom somewhere, I was out of luck.

I agonized over what to do while glaring at the chalkboard in front of the café that had the menu written on it. Would Toriko be satisfied with a crepe and latte? I dunno. Toriko wasn’t exactly a small eater when she was around me, but she had a bad habit of ordering everything she could, then making other people eat it for her... Besides, in my case, because of how much eating with her cost, I tended to scrimp and save on food expenses when I was on my own. It wouldn’t be all that weird if Toriko did the same.

Well, there’s no point worrying about it while hanging around somewhere I know she isn’t... I reconsidered what I was doing, then

headed back the way I had come. *If I don't find her, I'll figure out what to do then. On to the next one.*

Leaving the building, I crossed the road, and entered the building across the street. It was a tall one that I had been able to see from the station. The university in general was pretty tall, and it was kinda white in color.

The cafeteria I was heading to was on the fifth floor. The elevator was pretty packed, so I decided to give up and take the stairs. After hauling myself up to the fifth floor, I entered the cafeteria. The place seemed drained of color, maybe in part due to the thin clouds spread out outside the large windows. Rows of long tables with low-backed chairs continued all the way to the back of the large dining hall, taking up the majority of the floor space. Ignoring the long lineup at the serving corner along the wall, I searched for Toriko as I walked towards the back.

I searched from end to end, but there was no sign of her.

"This place is a miss too, huh?" I sighed, and started heading back to the entrance. Though there were a lot of people here, I didn't think there was any risk of me having overlooked her. Not many people look like Toriko.

Instead, I spotted a number of people who were probably similar to me, with the same boring fashion sense, and didn't know how to feel about that. There were a lot of girls in gaudy outfits, so it only made them stand out worse. Yeah, there were definitely a lot of sophisticated and stylish girls in this university. I wasn't just imagining it. I felt so out of place.

When I was leaving the cafeteria, I spotted some stairs off to the side. It looked like there was outdoor seating. The building was L-shaped, and the five-story section that jutted out from the rest had terrace seating on the roof.

The weather today wasn't too bad, but it was still January, so there weren't many people who would actively choose to eat outside right now. Still, I figured I might as well look, so I walked towards the stairs.

As I opened the door to the terrace, a chill wind rubbed against my face. I had been fine walking around outside earlier, but when you were just coming out of a heated building, it felt a lot colder. I shrank my neck inside the collar of my duffle coat as I walked out onto the roof. Even if there weren't that many of them, there were a few people scattered around the large terrace.

I could see Toriko there.

The person sitting alone at a table near the edge, with her back to me, was unmistakably Toriko. She wore a baggy, deep green mountain parka, and her blonde hair was tied in a ponytail that hung at her

back.

“Found her...” I said to myself, coming to a stop. I was happy to have located her sooner than expected, and relieved to see that she seemed to be doing well enough to eat outside in the winter. Well, I had figured all along that she was fine, but I had still been reasonably concerned.

What now? I asked myself. *Do I sneak up behind her and shout “Boo!”?*

Yeah, no... That could end badly. She had a gun. And so did I, for that matter. In the interest of avoiding any unfortunate accidents, I refrained from playing any tricks on her. I just walked over there, then circled around the table and sat across from her.

Toriko raised her face, then glared at me. This was new. Her face showed a sort of anger and wariness directed at someone rude enough to suddenly decide that they were going to share a table with you. She’d never given me that look before. The moment she registered who I was, it was replaced with a look of bafflement.

“Hey,” I said. I turned away, continuing to look around the area. “Don’t you have any friends to eat with?”

That was payback. Not that I had any clue if Toriko would remember saying the same thing to me, though.

“Sorawo... What’re you doing here?”

“It seemed like a good opportunity, so I decided to drop by.” I looked down at the tray in front of Toriko. She’d half finished it already, but it was a set meal with saffron rice, curry, and something fried.

“What’d you have to eat?”

“The Chef’s Choice lunch.”

“Hee hee. They’ve got stuff like that? In a cafeteria? Sounds expensive.”

“It’s only 500 yen.”

“Seriously? With how neat this campus looks, I was expecting it to be closer to 1,000 yen.”

“The cafeteria here’s cheap. This is still on the expensive side.”

The cold wind across the terrace was too strong, and we both scrunched our necks into our bodies.

“You should eat inside... You’ll catch a chill out here.”

“Too many people.”

“Oh, yeah?” I nodded, and Toriko gave me a dubious look.

“What are you grinning about?”

“Huh? Nothing, really.” I rubbed my cheeks. Had I been smiling that much?

Honestly, I can’t deny that I was a little relieved. I had secretly been worrying about what I’d do if she had a ton of friends here and

was living the good life on campus. Based on the glimpses of her shyness that I caught from day to day, I had assumed that wasn't the case, but seeing her eating by herself was still a relief.

I wonder what her life at university is normally like.

It felt like a long time since we'd first met, but this might be the first time I'd been curious about what kind of person Toriko was in this way.

"Why don't you get something, Sorawo?"

"I'm not a student here. Can I still use the cafeteria?"

"Nobody's going to ask you for your student ID."

"Yeah, I dunno... The line looked really long."

"I don't like being the only one eating."

"Okay, I guess I'll have a drink then."

Once I pulled a disposable bottle of tea out of my bag and sat back down, Toriko finally seemed to calm down. The leather-gloved left hand which she had been clenching slowly loosened. It looked like my sudden appearance had shaken her up.

"So? Why have you not been replying, Toriko-san?"

Toriko stared down at her plate awkwardly. She wasn't making any attempt to answer, so I kept asking.

"Does it have anything to do with the love hotel girls' party...?"

"..."

Yeah, go figure. That was about the only thing it could've been.

I took a sip of my tea as I thought about how to talk about it. Having wet my lips, I put the cap back on the bottle and set it down.

"Um... I didn't remember it very well, but, uh. I got drunk and did some pretty bad stuff, huh?"

Toriko gave me a probing look. "You don't remember a thing?"

"Some of it came back to me after I talked to Kozakura-san."

"Such as...?"

"Such as everyone dancing in the nude..." I felt awkward saying it, but Toriko leaned back in her chair, seeming deflated.

"Yeah, that was a thing that happened." The words came out surprisingly easily.

"Sorry. It was probably my fault everyone ended up like that.

"Your fault, Sorawo? Why?"

"Maybe I lost control of my right eye while I was drunk." Even as I said it, I nearly burst out laughing. *Urgh... I can't control my right eye... It's the alcohol's fault...!* Doesn't get cornier than that.

"Look, there it is again. Why do you keep grinning?"

"Oh, no, sorry. It's nothing." I recomposed myself and kept talking. "Anyway, I think that room might have turned into something like the interstitial space. I mean, there was a Balinese lion dancer..."

Toriko's eyes suddenly seemed empty.

“Lion dancer...” Toriko shook her head, as if trying to dispel the hazy memory. Once her eyes regained their focus, I continued.

“Anyway, that’s why I think everyone was acting weird. Sorry for putting you through that awkward experience.”

“Nah.”

“I don’t think it’ll do any good telling you not to worry about it, but, well, you know, I’m the one who feels the most awkward about it, so cut me some slack. Okay?” I tried to say that in a cheerful, jokey tone, but Toriko looked disconcerted. “Can’t you...?”

Toriko used her spoon to poke around the curry that must have long since gone cold. “It’d take more than that to make me feel awkward...” she said.

“Huh? Really?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, why weren’t you replying then?” I asked.

“I thought I was the only one who enjoyed it...” Toriko mumbled in response.

“What do you mean?”

“You didn’t seem like you were having much fun, Sorawo.”

“Uh...” That was unexpected, and I came up short for words.

“No... That’s not true at all.”

“Liar.”

“I’m not lying.”

“It’s a total lie. You called the others because you didn’t want to go alone with me, didn’t you?”

“It’s not...that I didn’t want to, but...”

“But?”

I had tagged on that “but” without thinking. I didn’t know what to say now.

Huh...? This is weird. When did I lose the initiative here?

“If I didn’t want to, I wouldn’t have gone at all,” I said, raising my voice in an attempt to reassert control.

Toriko didn’t miss a beat before saying, “Okay, then how about we go alone next time?”

“...”

“See, I knew it.” Toriko looked away from me. “I didn’t realize you didn’t want it. I’m sorry.”

Though she was apologizing, her tone was hard. Hard and cold. That’s when I finally realized: Toriko was mad.

I flinched when she suddenly rose from her seat. She walked away from the table, carrying the tray with her Chef’s Choice lunch set.

“H-Hold on!” I scrambled to my feet and chased after her. “Where are you going? We’re not done eating.”

“You want to eat? Here, have it.”

“No, I don’t want leftovers...”

“I don’t mind.”

“Well, you should.”

I was confused. I’d had the upper hand against Toriko at the beginning. She was the one who’d cut off contact without saying anything. When she first saw my face, she was acting all meek, wasn’t she? Yet before I knew it, she was the one who was mad, and I was running around after her. I had no idea what happened.

Toriko went inside without another glance at me. I followed her as she strode across the cafeteria, deposited her tray on the return counter, and left.

“Toriko,” I called out to her as I caught up to Toriko in the elevator hall.

“What are you mad for?”

“I’m not mad.”

“You so are...”

Even as the words left my mouth, it occurred to me we’d had this conversation before. Multiple times, at that. She was always the one asking why I was angry, and I was always saying I wasn’t. This was the first time our positions were reversed.

The elevator arrived, and the door opened. The students who had been lined up waiting piled in. It would be tight, but it looked like there was room for us too. Toriko didn’t board the elevator, though.

“Toriko? Aren’t you getting in?”

Instead of responding, Toriko let out an irate sigh, and turned around. Not towards the elevator, but to the stairs. I watched her go, dumbfounded, as she began quickly descending the stairs.

“Toriko!” I chased after her, racing down the stairs so fast I worried I might collide with the students climbing up them. Toriko was faster than me. As she pulled away, I nearly tripped over my own feet. By the time I reached the first floor, Toriko was on her way out the door.

“Toriko! Wait up!” I shouted as I came out of the building. She still didn’t stop, so I ran angrily after her. I reached out, grabbing the back of her coat.

“Let go!”

“No!” I reflexively shouted, and Toriko whirled around to face me. The hand I was holding onto her coat was getting pulled along, so I let go in a hurry. As I staggered backwards, Toriko’s swinging left hand hit me.

“Whoa!” She ended up pushing me away, and I fell over backwards. Fortunately, I landed on my butt and hands, and didn’t strike my head or anything.

Toriko gulped. “Y-Your hand...”

I looked up at her, shaking my hand to distract myself from the pain from it hitting the asphalt.

Toriko was looking down at me in shock. I was about to say something like, *What are you doing? That was dangerous*, but she had gone pale, and that startled me. I knew Toriko hadn't meant to shove me. It was just inertia, and bad timing.

"Uh, it's fine. No harm done. My hand just hurts a bit."

She hadn't said anything, but I smiled, trying to reassure her. It was the truth anyway. My hand stung, but I wasn't bleeding. In fact, if anything, I was relieved that Toriko had finally stopped.

But that relief was short-lived. Her gaze drifted away from me, wandering.

"Sorawo...?"

"I said I'm fine."

"Huh? Huh? Sorawo?"

There was something wrong. I thought she was too shaken to look me in the eye at first, but that apparently wasn't it. She seemed to look at me again for a moment, but her eyes passed right over me, continuing to search all over.

It's like she can't see me at all...

"Sorawo, where are you?"

With those words, my suspicion turned to certainty.

She can't see me.

She really can't see me.

"Toriko—" I hurried to my feet.

What in the world happened to her?

"I'm right here." I stepped forward, calling out to her. I was going to take her hand, try to calm her down.

That's when, before my very eyes, Toriko's form wavered. Then, in an instant, she vanished, swallowed up by silver phosphorescence.

2

"Toriko?!" It was my turn to be shocked. I rushed to where Toriko had been seconds ago and started looking around. Gone. She was gone. Nowhere to be found. Toriko had vanished without a trace. As if she'd never existed in the first place.

"Come on. You're kidding me, right? Why...?"

As I was there, about to fall into a state of panic, I noticed something odd. It wasn't just Toriko who'd disappeared—there was no one around as far as the eye could see.

It was noon, but all of the students who had been milling about were gone now, and the campus was silent and empty. In the space of maybe ten seconds, I had been left as the only living, moving person

here.

I groaned, overcome by déjà vu.

I'd experienced the same thing when I encountered the Time-space Man. That time, I had also noticed there was suddenly no one else around. No people, no cars, no sound of trains. This utter silence, like nothing I had ever experienced in the surface world, was the same as it'd been back then.

Basically, that meant this was the interstitial space.

I don't know why, but during the moment I tripped, I was cast out of the surface world. That had to be why we'd lost sight of each other too.

I focused on my right eye. If there was a gate, that should've let me see it...

"No dice, huh?"

I couldn't see one. Had the gate only opened for an instant? There was no trace of the silver phosphorescence. I stopped to think about how I was going to get back. Last time it had been a phone call from the man that brought me back to my world...

"Right, my phone!"

I pulled out my smartphone and powered it on. Thank goodness: the text hadn't been corrupted. Well, no, the display was weird in some places, but I could still read it, at least.

When I made a call, I got an ordinary dialing noise—and it went through!

"Sorawo?!" Toriko's voice shouted in my ear, and I unconsciously moved the phone a little further away from it.

"Uh... Hello, Toriko?"

"Sorawo! Where are you now?! Are you okay?!"

"C-Calm down. I'm fine."

"Thank goodness!"

I was relieved, but Toriko's response went well beyond that. I could just imagine her eyebrows drooping.

"When you just vanished suddenly, I... Where are you now?"

"The same place as before, but... I seem to have entered the interstitial space."

There was a moment's silence, and then Toriko let out a deep sigh. "Sorry... It's because I pushed you."

"I just tripped because of inertia."

"But..."

"You didn't do it on purpose. I know that. The more important thing is—"

"No!" Toriko shouted again, and I fell silent out of surprise. "I touched you...with my left hand," she explained, her voice tense.

"Huh? But you were wearing gloves, right?"

"I was. But... I felt it. When my hand hit you."

"You felt it?"

"It felt like I was touching you directly. Even through the glove!"

That makes sense...?

"So, basically, what you're saying is that your hand pushed me into the interstitial space? Hmm. But that's never happened before, right?"

"Yeah..."

"Well, whatever. Okay, so if you were able to push me out, maybe you can pull me back? Let's try it."

"How?"

"You could try grasping the air somewhere, like usual."

I could hear her swinging her left arm around and grunting on the other side of the receiver, but when she spoke again, her tone was dark.

"It didn't work. I can't feel anything."

"Hmm. No luck, huh? I tried looking with my right eye, and I didn't see anything either. If there was a gate, it may be gone now..."

I was pacing back and forth, thinking, when I spotted something moving in the corner of my eye and looked up.

"Ah...!"

"What? What's up?"

"Toriko... I see you."

"Huh?!"

"You're reflected in the glass."

In the windows of the building in front of me, I could see Toriko standing behind me. With the sky as cloudy as it was, it was quite a hazy image, but that was definitely Toriko's shadow.

"Where? Which glass?"

"Um, that might be hard to explain. Try pointing at random. Yeah, like that. Okay, now turn thirty degrees to your left. Yeah. Right in front of you."

"I only see my own reflection."

"Really? Okay, then maybe only I can see it."

"Oh..."

"It's fine, okay? I'll look for a way out. I'm sure I'll find a gate somewhere with my eye and you can just open it up with your hand."

"Yeah... Thank goodness your phone works."

"You said it. If we couldn't get in touch, this would have been a real headache."

"Hey, don't hang up," Toriko said as if just realizing something. "We don't know if you'll be able to get through to me again."

"I know. But, just in case, let's decide on a Plan B."

"Plan B?"

“You know how things got weird when we called Kozakura-san from Kisaragi Station? If the person on the other end of the line seems to be talking crazy like that, let’s hang up, and call back.”

“And what if we can’t connect?”

“Well, how about we walk to Jinbouchou, and enter the Otherside through the usual building? Though I’ve never used that elevator from the interstitial space before...” I said.

“I don’t know about that plan. I’d prefer to find a gate near here.”

“Yeah. Well... Let’s go, then.”

“Where to?”

“I can see you from here, so just walk wherever, and I’ll follow along.”

“This feels kinda lonely,” Toriko mumbled, and her image began to walk.

3

The interstitial space was always...unsettling, somehow. I could still read the notices on the bulletin board, but the words were strange and talking about things like the “Neighbor Building,” “open wounds,” and “gathering spots.”

Was the grass always this long? And was it a coincidence that the cracks in that building looked like a person’s face...?

I walked through the area, led on by a vague image reflected in the glass.

There were people here in the surface world, but I was alone here in this one. Was the reason Toriko’s shadow swayed at irregular intervals because she was avoiding people who were passing by?

“Hey, I’m just wandering around at random here. Is that okay?” Toriko said, sounding uncertain.

“Okay, give me the tour, then.”

“The tour?”

“How do you normally spend your time around the university, Toriko?”

There was no immediate response.

“Um? Hello?”

“You’ve never asked that before...” she said.

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Toriko said, then let out a goofy laugh. “I figure you just weren’t interested.”

“You might be right. I wasn’t all that interested.”

“So, what changed all of a sudden?”

“Nothing, really...” There was no particularly deep reason for the question. “Come on. I’m here anyway, so tell me about it.”

“What do you want to know?”

“Hmm, well... Do you always eat at that cafeteria?”

“It’s cheap and the portions are generous, so I go pretty often. Not every day, though. It’s pretty common for me to just grab something from the convenience store instead.”

“There are other cafeterias, right? You don’t use them?”

“Sometimes, when I feel like it.”

“Okay, I guess I got lucky, meeting you there today, then.”

“I was surprised. It was like you knew I’d be there when you showed up,” Toriko said with a laugh, then, sounding impressed, added, “Good job finding me. There’s a lot of people here.”

“Well, you were all by yourself, Toriko.”

“Well, sure, but... There’s a lot of girls who look like me, right? Here at this school.”

Now that she mentioned it, she might have been right. I had definitely spotted girls about as fashionable as her, who were quite pretty, and even had silky blonde hair.

“There was no one I’d ever have confused for you,” I replied. Toriko was silent for a moment, then let out a long sigh on the other side of the phone.

“You’re always so quick to say these things...”

“Huh?! Did I say something weird?”

“It’s fine. I think I’m just crazy.”

“What are you talking about?”

“...”

“Hey.”

“I just need to show you around, right?”

“Huh? Sure.”

“Well, come along, then.”

Toriko forced a change in subject, then walked forward at a brisk pace. I sped up to avoid being left behind.

“You still mad?”

“I’m not mad.”

Toriko headed towards a building. When we got close to the entrance, her reflection in the glass became a little clearer. With the light of the cloudy sky behind her, I couldn’t quite make out the expression on her face. She vanished before I had the time to look too close. She must have opened the door and gone inside in the surface world. I opened the door in this world and followed her.

There was a long corridor on the other side of a hall with a staircase. I could see classroom doors placed at fixed intervals along it. The buildings that housed classrooms were probably more or less the same at every university, but this one looked newer, and clearer, than the one at mine. Maybe it was the echoing footsteps, but it felt even

more silent in here than it had out there. The light streaming in through the windows made it feel like I was walking through a cave.

“Sorawo, you following me?”

“You’re in the corridor on the first floor, right?”

“Yeah. I’m going into the second classroom now.”

“Okay.”

I probably opened the door at the same time as Toriko. I saw her silhouette in the opposite window, standing in the door frame as I did. Inside, there was a large classroom with lines of long, wooden desks. The front had a sliding chalkboard and a lectern. Pretty normal, as university classrooms went.

“Where is this?”

“The classroom where I had a lecture before you showed up.”

“Oh, yeah? So this is where you study, huh?”

“Not much different from your place, right?”

“This is just a touch more stylish, though. Like the design of the lights.”

“What are you talking about?” Toriko chuckled.

In the window, I saw her walking slowly between the rows of desks. I leaned against the lectern, looking at the place where Toriko must have been in the surface world.

“What lecture? I mean, what department are you part of anyway?”

“I’m pretty sure I already said. At one of the afterparties, maybe.”

“Did you? I may have gotten too drunk to remember it.”

“...”

When I tried to lie my way out of not remembering it, I could sense the subtle waves of anger on the other side of the phone, so I gave up and apologized.

“Sorry. Tell me again.”

“English literature.”

“Oh, yeah? Makes sense. You *are* good at English,” I said, not meaning anything by it, and Toriko fell silent again. “Oh... Sorry, did I offend you?”

“Nah. It’s just...you touched a sore spot.”

“Huh?”

“I only applied to this place because I could speak English,” Toriko said, laughing, but it sounded self-derisive. “See, I didn’t have anything I wanted to do, or anything I really wanted to know when I joined the Department of English Literature. It just seemed easy to get into. So...when I heard the girls around me talking, I felt like I knew less and less.”

“What do you mean?”

“I realized that they all have things they want to do in the future,

things they're interested in, but I have nothing. When I started thinking about it again, I had no idea what I was doing here, and I was scared to talk to people."

This was the first time Toriko had talked about this. I'd heard about how she didn't go to high school in Japan, and had gotten into this university after taking an equivalency exam before. And that her tutor when studying for it had been Satsuki Uruma.

I'd met Toriko back at the start of May. If I remember correctly, Satsuki had disappeared three months before that. Calculating backwards from there, that put it around February of her first year in university, huh? That might have been the first time that Toriko, who felt abandoned after losing her idol, came back to her senses.

"You went to university because you had stuff you wanted to study—sociology, anthropology, and other stuff, right?"

"Well, yeah..."

"I respect that."

"Uh, it's really nothing special, though..."

It felt awkward being complimented like this. This was the first time Toriko and I had a serious talk about university, and what we planned to do in the future, and that was making me feel restless too. Unable to sit still, I was wandering around near the lectern when I saw something written on the board in chalk.

It looked like English, but not quite. Did the original passage mean something?

"You'll be in your third year next year, huh? Does your university have seminars, Sorawo?"

When Toriko asked me that, I reluctantly returned my focus to the conversation. "We do. You choose a seminar to join in your third year."

"Same as us. Which are you joining? Have you already decided?"

"Nah, not really..."

"Oh, I see."

"What about you, Toriko?"

"Same deal. I didn't join the program because I was interested in it, so I'd feel bad being there with the actual serious students..."

"You're sounding awfully timid."

"That's how I am, by nature."

"Now you're just lying. You're always super forward with me."

"Only with you, Sorawo."

Oh...

I shut my eyes tight despite myself.

I screwed up. This is going in a bad direction.

"Just me, huh?"

"Yeah."

"Yeah, I can see that. You're pretty shy, after all," I said.

"Yeah. When I meet someone for the first time, I can't even talk."

"Wait... Hold on. The first time we met you were able to talk just —"

I did it again! I hadn't been able to hold back and not point it out.

"Yeah... When I think I'm gonna be able to get along with someone, I tend to get a little too friendly," Toriko replied, sounding kind of meek.

So she realizes it...

"Well, uh, I'm glad it was me."

"Do you still feel the same way?"

"Of course I do." Maybe Toriko's timidity had irked me, because my tone got a little stronger there.

There was a short silence, then Toriko suddenly said, "Are we done here?"

"Uh, sure."

"Okay, let's move on to the next place."

I thought I heard a door opening, and turned to look. The classroom door was open.

Huh? Did I close it? I don't remember.

I didn't want there to be anything here, so I took a look with my right eye, just to be sure, but I was all alone, the same as before.

"Toriko, did you go out into the corridor?"

"No? I'm by the lectern now. Can't you see me?"

I looked back to the window, and sure enough I could see the blurry image of Toriko. "So you are. I wish I could see you a little more clearly, though."

"I wish I could say that. I can't even see you from where I am, you know that?"

"It's just a window, after all. If it were a mirror, then—Ah!" I raised my voice at the sudden realization. I must have been out of it. How did I not think of this sooner?

"What?!"

"Toriko, where's the washroom?"

"Huh? Did you wet yourself?"

"No, dummy! And shouldn't the question be 'are you going to wet yourself?'"

"You sounded so desperate, I had to assume..."

"Geez. No, that's not it. There's mirrors in the washroom!"

"Oh! Proper mirrors!"

"Yeah! Not this unreliable reflection in the glass. Or do you have one on you? A compact mirror?"

"I don't usually carry one around. You, Sorawo?"

"Me either..."

“We’re the same.”

What do you sound so happy for?

“Anyway! If we use the mirrors, I might be able to see you better.”

“Okay, let’s give it a shot.”

We each headed to the nearest washroom in our own worlds.

I left the classroom and returned to the entrance hall, entering the washroom in the shadow of the stairs. I immediately spotted the mirror there.

Reflected in it was...me. Just me.

“Well, Sorawo?”

“Yeah, sorry. Looks like my guess was wrong.”

“It didn’t work?”

“I can see myself.”

“Yeah. It’s a mirror, after all.”

“Uh, well. Yes, but...”

I had expected this to work, so I was pretty shocked. But why didn’t it? I could see her reflection in the glass, but not the mirror? What was the logic there? Okay, maybe expecting logic from the interstitial space wasn’t such a good idea, but still...

While I looked into the mirror, thinking about it, Toriko spoke up. “That’s just how it goes, I guess. Where to next?”

“Hold on...”

“Hm?”

“Just now, there was something...”

I sensed something amiss, and had Toriko stop. I felt like, for just a brief moment, those familiar golden locks had flashed across the corner of my eye, and so I got closer to the mirror. I tried narrowing my eyes, closing one eye then the other, and a number of other things before that golden color crossed the mirror again.

No doubt about it—that was Toriko’s hair! I was able to see her under a certain condition. But what was it?

“The angle...?”

“Huh?”

“I think I’ve worked it out. Hold on a second, okay?”

I was gradually narrowing down what the condition was. First, I tried looking straight at the mirror. I was focusing on my left eye’s normal vision for this. When I did, my right eye, which had lost focus, moved a little. It was like the ocular muscles had twitched slightly as I relaxed them. When it happened, I saw something different in the gap between my left and right fields of vision.

The mirror stirred like a pool of water, a silver haze covering its surface for a moment, and when it cleared—there was Toriko.

On the other side of the mirror, I could see Toriko’s eyes turned in my direction. She was pressing her smartphone against her ear, her

brow furrowed with concern. It was the first time I'd been able to get a proper look at her face in a while, and that really made me feel relieved. I'd been feeling pretty dejected.

As I tried to keep Toriko in my field of vision in an attempt to preserve my own sanity, I saw one of the stall doors behind her open. Someone came out of the stall. She dragged her feet as she headed out the door. A duffle coat, muffler, and short black hair. Even with her face turned downwards, I immediately recognized her.

It's me.

In the mirror, I raised my face, and...

The phone rang.

I jumped a little, looking away from the mirror.

The phone in my hand was ringing.

"...Hello?"

"Sorawo?"

"Toriko? Huh?"

"You okay?"

"What do you mean?"

I looked up as I asked that, but only my own bewildered face stared back at me from the mirror. I couldn't see Toriko, or the me who had come out of the stall anymore.

Toriko let out a sigh of relief.

"You scared me there. You started talking nonsense."

"Oh... So you hung up?"

"Yeah. It seemed like things were getting bad."

"What was I saying?"

"It was about 'a lively place where people gather,' or something... Didn't make any sense to me."

Oh, yeah... If just one of us was going to go crazy, now that I thought about it, it was more likely to be me, the one in the interstitial space. I didn't like that I hadn't realized that sooner.

I shook my head. "Thanks. I'm glad we had a Plan B prepared."

"Hey, listen, I really don't want to be the one hanging up. I did it reflexively before, but when I started thinking it might not connect again, I got super scared."

"Yeah, I get that. Sorry."

"Seriously. My fingers are still trembling."

"I was able to see you, Toriko."

"What? Really?"

"Yeah. You looked worried."

"Well, duh?! I could slap you right now, Sorawo."

"Attagirl. Try to keep your spirits up like that."

"Ohh, I'm mad. I'm gonna sock you. I swear."

"Now we see your violent nature exposed."

As I was teasing her, Toriko started growling like a dog, so I decided it was time to lay it off.

“So? Think the mirror will work as a gate?” Toriko asked, and I looked at it again.

“I saw a silver haze, so I think if we time it right, it could, but...”

Concerned about what was behind me, I turned to look. The stalls here were all open, and there was no one around. Was what I had just seen the doppelganger of me that had appeared in the past?

“I’d rather not try it here. Can we go somewhere else?” I said, and Toriko got suspicious.

“Did something happen?”

“Nah, not really.”

“Really? Well...do you want to go to the washroom upstairs?”

“I guess...washrooms are the only places with mirrors, huh?” I wasn’t keen on the idea, but what choice did I have? I’d seen the doppelganger before. It was creepy, seeing a warped version of myself with all the ugliness inside me emphasized, but if I brought it up now, I would only worry Toriko more.

We left the washroom, went up the stairs, and entered the second floor washroom. After checking that all the stall doors were open, I looked into the mirror again. Recalling the way it had felt the last time, I relaxed the muscles in my right eye, and...

It came.

The silver haze came over my vision again.

Nice. Now, if I could see Toriko, I could have her use her left hand to open the gate to the surface world. I’d need to climb up onto the counter to go through the mirror, though.

As I looked and focused, Toriko’s form slowly appeared...

“Huh?”

Something was weird. I wasn’t looking straight at her, but upwards.

And the scenery wasn’t the washroom I expected. It was outdoors. The sky was clear, and I could see the tips of the tall, faded grass. The Toriko looking down at me wore an olive-colored jacket zipped up to her neck, along with jeans, and lace-up boots.

“Huh? Huh?” The surprise was apparent in my voice.

I could tell with just a glance: this was the scene where Toriko and I had first met on the Otherside.



Toriko reached her hand out towards the mirror. My eyes were drawn towards her approaching face. In the next moment, I dove into her eyes. Or that's what it felt like. My field of view flipped around. I saw myself, soaked and half underwater, taking Toriko's hand, looking towards me in awe. My hair was plastered to my head, and water dripped pitifully from my nose and mouth, but my eyes sparkled—they were so incredibly full of life. But how...?

“How do I look anything like Ophelia?!”

This time, I managed to regain my sanity before Toriko hung up on me. The scene in the mirror wasn't the field in the other world anymore, but the washroom it originally was. What had changed was that I could see the other me having completely left the stall. She dragged her feet, approaching me with strange, robotic movements. Her body was poorly balanced. I felt like her hands were stretched and strangely elongated.

Instinctively, I turned around. There was nobody there. Looking back to the mirror, the other me had vanished from there too.

“Sorawo, did you say something? Should I call back again?”

“Nah... It's fine.”

“You sure?”

“So, uh, listen. I saw you. From the first time we met.”

“Huh...?” Toriko sounded bewildered.

“When I was drowning in the other world. I was looking at myself through your eyes.”

“Through my eyes?”

“Yeah.”

There was a moment's silence, and then she shouted. “Hold on?! Does that mean you could see how I see you?”

“I guess it does?”

“Wait! Stop it! Ahh, you can't do this to me! This is the worst!” Toriko started panicking, which confused me.

“Uh, it didn't feel particularly malicious or anything.”

“That's not the issue! Hey, could you stop picking on me, and hurry up and come back?”

“I'm not picking on you! But, darn. Do you think we can try it again?”

“Sorry... Someone came in here.”

“All right. Let's go to another floor then.”

“What is this, the toilet tour?”

We moved to the third-floor washroom, and tried the same thing there.

When the silver haze cleared this time, it was a dark room. There was something like a person's head in front of me, and on the other

side of it I could see Toriko and myself looking towards me. The door behind them was open, and I could see a familiar street outside it.

Oh, crap! That's what the road outside my apartment looks like through the Pandora mirror stand in the room next door!

The moment I grasped the situation, I instinctively closed my eyes. In the mirror, the door that led to the modular bathroom opened, and I felt like I saw myself come out of it for a moment. Both of my elongated, mantis-like arms were raised, but I forced myself not to focus on it.

"Toriko, are you okay?!"

"Huh?! I'm fine, but... Did something happen?"

Thank goodness. No matter what was going on, it didn't seem to be affecting Toriko in the surface world.

"I may be starting to figure this out. The mirrors in this interstitial space might be connected to mirrors that you and I have seen before." I explained what I was experiencing, but Toriko seemed mystified.

"The mirrors are connected? So you can travel through time?"

"Yeah, no, pretty sure it doesn't work like that... If the current me turned up in the place where we first met, it would cause some really weird things to happen."

"That'd create a time paradox, yeah."

"So I think I'm just seeing scenes from that time through the mirror."

"So, we can't use it as a gate, then?"

"It feels like it should work, but when the scenes appear, my attention is pulled into them. That makes me start going crazy, and it's keeping me from sending you the signal."

"Then how about I keep my hand on the mirror the whole time? If I do that, then even without the signal, I'll notice as soon as the feel of it changes. Then I can pull on it."

"It's a good idea, I think."

"Okay, then let's try—"

"No, hold on. This place is pretty tight, so I want to do it somewhere more open, in case things go south, and we have to run."

I stopped Toriko. The doppelgangers had me worried, and so did the fact that I had seen Pandora just now.

"Somewhere other than a washroom? Hmm," Toriko thought about it. "The side mirror of a car, maybe...? Oh, I know. They sell mirrors at the convenience store, right? Why don't I buy one?"

"I won't fit through a small hole like that."

"Oh, yeah. That's right, huh? Well... There's a multipurpose building that the sports clubs use when practicing. It's got a gymnasium, and I think there's a big mirror there."

"Okay, let's try going there."

We left the washroom and headed outside the building again.

4

We reached the multipurpose athletics building and headed inside; the first floor was a gymnasium. I immediately opened the door to go looking for a mirror, but this time, Toriko stopped me.

“Wait, Sorawo. This one may be a no-go.”

“Huh? Why?”

“There’s a whole bunch of people.”

“Oh...”

The interstitial space was as deserted as ever, but there were other people where Toriko was.

“There are people who go to the gym in the middle of the day, huh?”

“I don’t think time of day has much to do with it.”

“Do you ever come here, Toriko?”

“Sometimes. When I want to run.”

“Oh yeah?”

I don’t think I had ever, at any point in my life, felt like I wanted to run, so that didn’t click with me. I’d been forced to run a number of times, though.

Peering in through the door, I saw a wide, empty space with lines of exercise equipment. These machines were ostensibly meant for physical training, but maybe they had been warped by the interstitial space, because with all the leather belts and chains, they all looked like torture equipment to me. There was a large mirror, but if it was hard for Toriko to go in there on her side, it wasn’t going to do us much good. Even if I was able to escape, a whole lot of people would see me emerging from the mirror—and they’d see Toriko’s translucent hand.

“Okay, let’s try another building then...”

I was about to leave, but Toriko spoke up. “Let’s look in the other rooms first. The dance clubs use this building for practice, so we might find other rooms with mirrors.”

She led the way, and we checked the other rooms one by one. When we were in hallways without windows or other reflective surfaces, it was hard to spot Toriko, so I had her give regular updates on her current position.

When we did find mirrors they were too small, or the rooms were in use in the surface world, so it was hard to find a good spot. We kept at it, and in a hallway on the fourth floor, Toriko shouted, “Sorawo, I found one! Second door from the back on the right-hand side!”

“Yeah, yeah.”

I opened the door she'd indicated; it was a brightly lit room with plywood flooring. The whole back wall was covered in mirrors. It might have been used for dance practice, because the entirety of the floor was covered in small scuffs and scratches.

"Oh, just what we were looking for."

"No one's here. Let's use it. I'll lock the door, okay?" Toriko said, and I locked up on my side too. We didn't want anything coming in from outside to interrupt us. It might slow down our escape if anything happened that forced us to flee, but...this was probably the best room we could ask for, so I wanted to do whatever it took to get out of here.

I took my Makarov out of my backpack and kept it in my right hand. It'd ruin everything if I accidentally discharged the weapon, but I wanted to play things safe.

"I'm in front of the mirror. Right in front of it," Toriko said on the other side of the phone. I stood in the same spot.

"I'm ready on my end too."

"Okay. I'm gonna touch the mirror now."

"Okay. I'll look with my right eye." I focused on the mirror in front of my eyes.

Okay, now what am I going to see this time..?

As I tried to remember what memories of mine included mirrors, a silver haze covered the whole mirror.

Now!

It happened just as I was about to open my mouth to give Toriko the signal. A train came right at me. The glare of the headlights on the front car was approaching me at an incredible speed. Obviously, I screamed.

It's gonna hit me!

My eyes went dark.

Dark...

Still dark.

I realized I hadn't been run over, and looked up. I saw myself. When our eyes met, my face contorted, and I clutched my head. Then I could see no more.

Was that...the scene from when we escaped Kisaragi Station?

Some time passed, and then my vision suddenly brightened again. I raised my head. I knew it. It was a train in the surface world, on the Seibu-Ikebukuro Line like that time back then.

I was clinging to the metal bar next to the door, my body swaying with the motion of the train. I couldn't hear any sound, but it was clear at a glance that I was bawling my eyes out like a child. My eyes were drawn to a tear dripping from my eyelashes.

I was reflected on the surface of the teardrop. I was crawling on a

concrete floor, with creepy movements like I had lost all of my joints. There was a hand in my field of vision. A translucent left hand, with the glove removed. The hand touched my body, which was mushy, like clay. It moved as if trying to confirm the outline of my body. It rolled up my clothes, exposing my back. It slapped against my skin. Again and again. There were multiple white hand prints left on my back. I looked over my shoulder, looking into my eyes reproachfully. I was drawn into the gaze of those moist eyes again, and...

This was the other world, the time we met the Yamanoke. I was watching past events through Toriko's eyes. That had to be it.

Oh. It doesn't have to be a place with a mirror.

The eyes are mirrors reflecting the world.

If Toriko is next to me, that's just like there's a mirror reflecting me at all times.

Even as I was thinking, the scenes rapidly shifted from one to the next.

Me, acting suspiciously as Toriko handed me a fat wad of cash.

Me, trying so hard to finish the excessive amounts of food Toriko ordered.

Me, with my arm around Toriko as I fired the shotgun resting on the balcony railing.

Me, on top of a military vehicle, looking ahead of us, a tense look on my face.

Me, in a swimsuit, not quite willing to look Toriko in the eye.

Me, sitting across from her in a yakitori place, looking to the side sullenly.

Me, lying on the floor, blanching with pain, but still seriously looking at the woodwork mosaic.

Me, looking blankly at Toriko on the roof as we waited for the elevator.

Me, sitting next to her on the train, playing with my slightly longer hair.

Me, bound to a chair, looking up at Toriko in disbelief.

Me, clinging to Toriko, my face a mess of tears as I babbled something.

Me, in the changing room at the hot springs, looking tense as I took off my clothes.

Me, in a dark hotel room, rinsing out my mouth in front of a sink with no running water, looking exhausted.

Me, opening the box containing the folding knife, my eyes widening with surprise.

The scenes played out without sound or smell, only vision, but there was one thing, like it or not, that came across clearly.

Wow. Toriko Nishina really loves me...

No, I knew that. I already knew that. She'd told me as much herself, so it was a bit late to be saying this, but...

Geez, you know... She really does. Toriko loves me.

In Toriko's eyes, I looked like I was adorable, strong, reliable, smart, like someone she just couldn't leave alone... I was way more attractive than I ever would have thought myself.

If it were just completely detached from my own self-image, I might have been able to ignore it, saying she'd given me too much credit. But at the same time, she saw my pettiness, the times I was lame, pitiful, and ugly. She saw it all.

She saw it, and accepted it.

Honestly, I didn't know what to do.

Toriko had said she didn't want me to know how she saw me, but I was really shocked to find out too.

Could I accept this much affection?

Was I giving her the same in return?

No, I'm not. Not in the slightest.

I had caught a glimpse of the morning after the love hotel girls' party through Toriko's eyes. I was immersed in a bathtub with hibiscus leaves floating on the surface of the water, staring off into space. Toriko's hand entered my field of vision. She tried to hold my hand under the water, but I was so out of it I was non-responsive. As I saw Toriko's hand pull back, limp, I felt something squeeze tight in my chest.

Then another scene, one that had just happened, appeared.

It was from Toriko's perspective, walking away quickly as she left the cafeteria. I was following her, a stupid look on my face, and stood next to her in the elevator hall. I saw my face in profile. It bore a carefree look that knew nothing of what she was going through. Like I was thinking, *Oh, look, Toriko's throwing a tantrum again. Gosh, what ever shall I do?* Toriko headed towards the stairs. She descended them with long strides. Her vision blurred. She raced down to the first floor, pushed the door open, and went outside. Her field of vision filled with nothing but asphalt. One, then two tears fell to the ground.

I'm such a fool.

I assumed she was mad. Toriko hadn't been mad. She'd been sad.

Because I'd rebuffed her overtures. Because even though I knew how she felt, I was too much of a coward.

The phone in my hand vibrated and began ringing. My consciousness returned from afar. Once again, there was a figure behind me with hands that were elongated like those of a praying mantis.

I was in no state of mind to be afraid of that ugly doppelganger of me. In my head, I spoke to the figure with its face still downturned.

Hey, what are you going to do? Doppelganger.

I'm feeling kind of off-balance today...

"Toriko, you see everything that's wrong with me. But you don't go away. I don't even know how to make sense of it. What am I supposed to do with someone like that?"

There was no response.

"I love you too, but... Well, no, do I? I think this is a kind of love... Yeah, I love you... No doubt about that..."

I felt if I told her how I felt, put it into words, it would just become even more hazy. My head started itching, like I had been in a hot bath too long and the heat was getting to me. I scratched my head, then let out a sigh.

"Maybe I should put some more serious thought into this..." I mumbled, and the figure behind me looked up.

It had...a face other than mine. I'd never seen this woman before.

It wasn't a doppelganger!

"Huh? Who're you?!" I cried out in surprise, and the mantis woman wrapped her arms around me from behind, like she was hugging me.

"Eek!"

Without even thinking, I pointed the Makarov in my right hand over my shoulder, and started pulling the trigger. I wasn't aiming, but she was right behind me, so the mantis woman took a bullet right in the face.

"Ow! My ears...!"

I had fired right near my face because I didn't have time to think about it, and now there was a sharp pain in my right ear. The mantis woman's head was knocked back hard. But she didn't go down. I focused on my right eye again, trying to see the true form of my enemy.

Right in front of me, I saw a hand print.

It appeared suddenly, as if someone were touching the other side of the mirror glass.

Toriko's hand!

I stuffed the Makarov into my duffle coat and touched the hand print with my own right hand.

I could feel it. Not the hard surface of a mirror, but the softness of her hand. I instinctively gripped it, and she squeezed back. Our fingers intertwined, as if it were across the surface of a pool of water, and my hand sunk into the mirror. I felt her pull hard, and then...

"Pwah!" I gasped.

"Sorawo!"

I suddenly realized I was with Toriko and still holding my ringing phone in my left hand.

When I looked up, Toriko looked absolutely relieved as she looked down at me from up close.

“I-I’m back...”

“Welcome home, Sorawo.”

I turned back to look behind me, in the room, and in the mirror, there was only us.

No, wait. There it is.

I don’t know where it came from, but there was a single black mantis in front of the mirror, staring at me. I glared back, and the mantis seemed to give up, looking away, then skittering off along the wall.

The phone cut out, and it was suddenly quiet.

“You smell like gunpowder. Did you shoot something? You’re not hurt, are you?” Toriko asked, sounding worried. I looked at her for a little while, then, I took a deep breath—and I gave Toriko a big hug.

“I’m sorry, Toriko.”

“Wh-What? What brought this on?”

“I’m sorry for making you sad.”

Thinking back, whenever I was hurting, Toriko would always give me a hug. But I had never done the same for her. Not once.

Not even after learning how she felt about me.

Man, I was terrible...

I had one more reason for hugging her. I didn’t want her to see my face.

When I saw myself through Toriko’s eyes, I realized something for the first time. I had always thought I was doing a pretty good job of masking my emotions, but...

No, that wasn’t true at all. Every one of them, positive or negative, showed on my face, plain as day. That might have been the biggest disconnect with my image of myself.

Realizing that every time I had tried to skirt around some issue, or outright lie to Toriko, she had seen right through me.

“You can go ahead and slap me. Like you promised you would,” I said.

“What...?”

I couldn’t look Toriko in the eye, so I just tightened my arms around her.

File 18: Alone Together in a Mayoiga

1

“It’s a dog,” Toriko said all of a sudden, so I stopped writing in my notebook and looked up.

“A dog?”

“Isn’t that what that is?”

Toriko was looking towards the east side of the slope. I laid my pencil down on top of my notebook, then walked around the AP-1 to stand beside Toriko and look down from the ridge.

The dry grass lay flat, with a thin layer of lingering snow dotted around the landscape. It was the first Saturday in March; there wasn’t even a hint of snow left in the surface world, but there was here in this one. Down at the bottom of the hill we were on was a field of tall grass with large puddles scattered around.

I looked in the direction Toriko was pointing for a while before spotting something that was moving.

“Where’s the dog?”

“It was just moving...” Toriko was looking through a pair of binoculars. I shaded my eyes with my hands and squinted. I had figured since Toriko had a pair of binoculars there was no need to buy one for myself, but it was inconvenient at times like this. It was too much effort to lift up the rifle and look down the scope every time too.

“Huh? I lost it. Where’d it go...” Toriko said, turning left and right with the binoculars. “Huh? Was I seeing things?”

“Maybe? We’ve hardly ever seen anything alive and moving during the day in this world...” I had started to say when there was a big gust of wind. The distant grass swayed in waves, and I saw something in the middle of it.

“Ah...!”

For an instant, it looked like a naked person, down on all-fours, and I was shocked. Its limbs had looked long enough, and its size about large enough for it to be human. Its two black eyes sparkled in the sunlight. The moment I thought, *It’s looking at us too*, it moved. Once its four large legs started running, it vanished into the grass in no time.

“See! You saw it, right?!” Toriko shouted excitedly, and I got caught up in her enthusiasm.

“I did! I did! There was something there!”

“Hey, that was a dog, right?”

“May...be...? Did you get a look at it through the binoculars?” I asked.

“Not a clear one... But I think it was a dog. It had ears and a nose.”

“I think *most* animals have ears and a nose.”

“What did it look like to you, Sorawo?”

I had to think about that. I had only seen it for a second, and when I tried to remember it only a vague fragmentary image came to mind. “Hmm... It seemed a bit big for a dog, you know?”

“A wolf, then?”

“No, it was thinner...like a deer, maybe?”

“Deer are more brown. It looked kinda white to me.”

“Couldn’t that be the lighting? It was kinda brown too. It was blending into the grass after all.”

A goat, a pony, an escaped cheetah, an emaciated boar... We came up with all the theories we could, but our recollections of the creature were all vague, so we couldn’t prove any of them. There was no disputing it was some kind of animal, though. The way it moved around so quickly on four legs wasn’t human.

We kept watching to see if it would make another appearance, but the only things moving were the grass swaying in the wind and the clouds drifting across the sky. It was cold just sitting there, so we gave up and turned to go.

I headed back to the AP-1 and opened up the notebook on top of the vehicle. It was a waterproof one, making it safe to use outdoors. It was size B6, made of something called Yupo paper, and felt smooth, but was still easy to write on.

I wrote a 犬, the kanji for dog, on the map, then added a question mark.

“Is that it?” Toriko asked, peering over my shoulder with a dissatisfied look on her face.

“What more do you want me to write?”

“Why not draw a picture?”

“There’s no need.”

“I mean, anything we write over here is nonsense once we go back.”

“...” I’d forgotten that.

“Okay? Go on, draw something,” Toriko continued, triumphant, and weirdly pushy. I was kinda frustrated, so I passed her the notebook and pencil.

“You draw.”

“Whaaa? I wanted to see your drawings,” she complained, but

took the notebook and scribbled something before handing it back. She added a dot to the upper left of my 犬, making it look not entirely unlike the face of a dog with its tongue sticking out.

I silently took the notebook back, put a cap on the pencil, and shoved them both into my mountain parka.

“Say something, would you?”

“That looked pretty lazy...”

“You meanie!”

“I mean, it’s still practically an ideograph.”

“It looks like a dog’s face, right? It’s a picture.”

Toriko was insistent, but when I thought about it again, I didn’t know anymore. Some kanji were pictographs to begin with, so where did it stop being a picture and start being an ideograph?

“Well, whatever. I’ll be looking forward to seeing how it turns out back in the surface world,” I said.

“Okay. If it’s a proper picture, you’re treating me.”

“Is that the game? And wait, treating you to what?”

“I meant you’d be paying the bill at the after-party. But I can ask for anything? Hmm, what should I go with, then?”

“You better think carefully. Because if it’s not a picture, you’re the one who’s gonna be treating me.”

Before we moved on, I turned back to the swaying grass once more.

Was it really an animal...?

The other world was suddenly full of life once night fell, but it was never like that during the daytime. We had seen things in the distance a number of times. But were they alive? Were they trash blowing around in the wind? Or some phenomenon unique to the Otherside? It was hard to say.

Besides, we had never met a normal animal here in this world. There were the human-faced beasts that had chased us when we wandered into Kisaragi Station, the Walking Gallows, which had been created when a robot meant for carrying luggage wandered into a glitch, and then there was the Kudan... That thing we had just seen might not have been an animal at all, but something more sinister.

Toriko apparently was thinking the same thing as me, because she took the AK off the AP-1’s rack, and checked it was loaded before sitting in her seat, gun still in hand. “Could you drive, Sorawo?”

I nodded. If that animal, or whatever it was, came after us, I’d feel a lot better if Toriko was holding a gun. I sat in the driver’s seat, and started up the AP-1. The diesel engine let out a happy sound, and white smoke came out of the exhaust pipe.

We were currently on top of a low ridge that ran from north to south, rising and falling as it went. We had climbed up the west side,

and were using it to survey the surrounding terrain. The verdant mountains in the north stretched out like a person lying down to sleep, and to the south was a series of hills, none of them particularly different from any of the others. Looking back the way we had come, there was a single campfire in the middle of an open field. I couldn't be sure it was a real campfire. One of the entry points from the Farm was near that campfire, and there had been the remains of small animals caught in spider webs there. It felt dangerous, somehow, so we were avoiding it. There was no one around, so it was strange that it was still burning, the same as when we had come before. But if there was someone feeding the fire, that was an issue too, though.

We were currently...I'm not sure where. I hadn't figured out how this location connected to the other places we knew in the other world just yet. I was recording nearby landmarks to try and puzzle that out.

I checked the compass one more time, then started off in the AP-1. We were heading towards the mountains in the north. If we went someplace higher up, we might get a slightly better understanding of the surrounding area.

This was our third trip to the other world since the start of the new year. With the university on spring break, it had been easy for us to get things done, but the snow was taking its time to melt on this side, so it took a while before we could start exploring again.

At the start of February, the ground had still been covered with snow, so all we were able to do was check on the AP-1, which had been left here since Christmas. It finally started to thaw in the middle of the month, so we decided to try bringing the AP-1 back to the surface world. It made it through the gate just fine, and we were able to get it into a room on the Farm.

Then we ran into a problem.

The AP-1 was 2.2 meters long, 1.5 meters wide, and 1.8 meters tall. I measured the doors, and they were nowhere near wide enough for us to take it out into the hall.

But I wanted to clear this hurdle somehow. The multiple gates on the Farm were all in the same building. If we could take the AP-1 through the building to the other gates, it would make exploring them much easier.

I considered just smashing the walls to widen the doorways ourselves, but I had to conclude it was too much for us to handle. Even if we could do it, we would run into more problems with the stairs. The building was three stories, and there were gates on all of them.

Seeing no better option, I consulted with Migiwa, and asked if we could have some construction work done.

"I'd like to make it so we can move the AP-1 around the building,

and access all of the gates.”

When I openly explained what I wanted, he just looked at me in silence for a good five seconds. He may have been exasperated, but he didn't stop us, so it all worked out in the end. As a result of our discussion, we were able to expand the doors of all the rooms with gates and install an elevator to move between floors. Migiwa had already planned to make it so we could bring vehicles out through the basement where the Round Hole was and had brought in heavy machinery to make a ramp there, but it wasn't finished yet. We'd delayed the elevator until later and were just expanding the doorways for now.

Surprisingly, the operators from Torchlight were the ones who came to do the construction. I was just thinking I recognized some buff foreigners who had shown up when their company president, Sasazuka, came to greet us.

“When you run a PMC in Japan, it's often convenient to have a construction business too,” she explained, and gave me another business card with the name “Tomoshihi Engineering” on it.

On the site, Toriko and I were given helmets, goggles, and dust masks, and we endured the loud noise and dust to stand guard. If one of the gates opened somehow, the workers would be in danger, so we couldn't be completely hands-off with the construction.

For the first construction project, we chose to expand the doors of two rooms on the first floor. It didn't need to be pretty, so the job got done faster than I'd expected.

The AP-1 passed through a doorway framed with yellow foam rubber, turned to move down the hall, then entered the other newly expanded door. The test was a success.

The second project was putting in new doorways for all of the rooms on the first floor, and after that we were done for the time being. The second and third floors would wait until the elevator was put in.

With all the preparations complete, we made our first real trip into the other world since Christmas.

Since Christmas...

The knife I'd received then was still in my pocket. I felt like if I put it away somewhere, it would never get used again. Toriko had gone to the trouble of getting me a practical gift, and she had said she wanted me to be able to use it regularly.

Coward that I was, I have to admit I was intimidated by the big emotions behind the present. But I was pretty shocked when I made Toriko cry recently, so I was trying not to act too dense. I didn't know how far I could go, and I wasn't sure of my own feelings yet...

The AP-1 pattered along. I threw bolts from my nail bag at regular

intervals and occasionally adjusted things so we didn't go off course. Toriko sat up straight, keeping an eye on both sides of the ridge. When our eyes met, she smiled at me.

I couldn't take it and turned my eyes back to the front. Hopefully I wasn't blushing. Look at this—right after I had resolved to do better. Every time I was struck by the inevitable realization that Toriko loved me, my heart went into panic mode.

2

The ridge road continued into the mountains where we eventually found our path blocked by a dense coniferous forest. It was so thick that not only were we unable to go any further with the AP-1, we questioned whether it was wise to even advance on foot. We headed down the western slope, hoping to search along the edge of the woods.

We had left early in the morning, so it was only 11:00 a.m. If time didn't get all weird like when we encountered the Yamanoke, there was still plenty of time before sundown. We had brought our tent and sleeping bags too, so we could spend the night in this world if we needed to.

Still, we weren't planning to go that far today. Our primary objective was to explore the area around the gate and map it out. We had made it through a night here before, but that didn't change the fact that the Otherside was more dangerous at night than during the day. Toriko and I agreed that we should avoid camping out any more than necessary and go home like good little girls when we were able to.

We continued through the foothills, tracing the edge of the forest. The water seeping out of the slope flowed along our path. Was it meltwater? There were a large number of fallen leaves in the places where the current slowed. Looking at those leaves, I realized something. The type of trees had changed. Looking up, the conifers had been replaced with deciduous trees, and the space between them had widened too.

"Isn't that a road, Sorawo?" Toriko asked and pointed up ahead. She was right. I could see a slanting surface that followed the mountain face. It was maybe wide enough for one vehicle, at most. It looked like the AP-1 could use it, but...

We stopped in front of the hill, and both got off the vehicle for a moment. Before going any further, we checked the depth of the flowing meltwater at our feet. It'd be bad if there was a gutter there. I threw a bolt in, then poked at it with a branch... It was fine. No more than a centimeter deep, which was just how it looked.

We splashed across it, then went up the hill on foot to take a look. The hill road was covered in fallen leaves and curved gently as it continued up the mountainside. I couldn't see the glimmer of any glitches either. Looking at the side of the road, the ground beneath the leaves was solid, so a landslide seemed unlikely.

Deciding we were probably good to go, we headed back to the road we had come from and boarded the AP-1.

The leaves crunched beneath our treads. I kept looking over my shoulder, checking that nothing was following us as we climbed the hill. There was a steep upward slope on the right side of the road, densely forested, and on the left side there was an equally steep downward slope. I kept to the right-hand side to avoid carelessly pitching us down the hill. Unlike mountains in the surface world, you could clearly hear the sound of the wind shaking the branches of the trees and the leaves rustling here. The lack of singing birds or chirring insects made it that much easier to hear.

"It makes me uneasy, somehow," Toriko said in a low voice. "The other world is always quiet, but when you go into the mountains, it feels even more lonely."

"You'd usually expect a place like this to be teeming with life, after all."

"Do you think there are animals that wandered in from the surface world, like us?"

"It's kind of strange that there aren't. I wonder about that," I said, looking up at a branch that reached out over the road like a person's arm. "There are plenty of plants, at least. I don't know a whole lot about plant types, but these don't seem all that different from what we see in the surface world."

There had clearly been something off about plants we'd encountered in the residential area north of the skeletal building, but that had to be an exception. The situation in which we'd encountered them had been special too.

Toriko glanced behind us. "If that animal we saw earlier really was a dog, it may have wandered in here from somewhere. Shouldn't we rescue it?"

"If it wanted human help, it'd have come to us, I think. It might even be so hungry it decides it wants to attack us instead, human or not. That's what worries me."

"Wait. Are you a dog-hater, Sorawo?"

"I don't hate dogs... Toriko, have you ever run into a feral dog? They're pretty scary."

"Huh? Have you been attacked before?"

"In a ruin, once. Maybe I invaded its territory. It started growling like crazy. Thinking back now, it was an ordinary mutt and on the

small side really, but I was just a kid. I didn't have a gun like I do now, so I got super scared."

"What'd you do?"

"I knew if I turned my back it would chase me, so I stared it down while slowly backing away. Once I was out of the ruin, I got on my bike and booked it. It still came after me, barking, for a while. I thought I was gonna die."

"It wouldn't attack a person on a bike, right?"

"I can look back on it and think that way now, but when you're scared, you're scared. Its eyes looked crazy."

I looked over my shoulder, just to be safe. Okay, good—we weren't being followed.

"Even if that was a dog, what if there's a pack of ferals that have established themselves on the Otherside?" I asked. "If they rush us all at once, they could be more dangerous than some of the monsters we've faced."

"Uh, yeah... I wouldn't like that. I'm not confident I could shoot them right away," Toriko said with a frown, then her face lit up as she had an idea. "I know! How about we get something like pepper spray?"

"The kind they sell for self-defense?"

Hmm... That might be a good idea. It was best to avoid shooting, after all.

"Yeah. If we mess up and spray it into the wind, we might get ourselves too, though."

"That still beats getting bitten. The outdoor shop we went to a while back had bear spray, so maybe that'd work?"

"Yeah, let's go with that. If it works on bears, it's gotta work on dogs too."

Now that I think about it, I had the most fun when I was talking to Toriko about stuff like this. I never felt tense at all when we were talking about exploring the other world. It was exciting, and the back and forth between us came easy. Toriko was quick-thinking, reliable, and could make up for my shortcomings. I don't think I could have asked for a better partner. That made things easy on me, but...

Was this the kind of relationship Toriko wanted?

While I was lost in my own thoughts, Toriko suddenly spoke. "Oh, but wait... If there's dogs, maybe there're bears too?"

"There's an unpleasant thought. Well, sure... It's possible, I guess."

"I know, right?"

"Wait, no, hold on. We don't even know that that was a dog yet. Right now, it's *possible* that any animal could be here," I said.

"Well, sure."

"Right? I mean, it's rare enough to even meet other humans in—"

It happened in the middle of that sentence. with what felt like almost pre-planned timing. Somewhere in the distance, there was a dry bang. As it echoed across the mountains, growing fainter, the two of us looked at one another.

“That was...” I said, and Toriko nodded.

“It was a gunshot.”

I stopped the AP-1 and killed the engine. We stayed put, listening for a while.

There were rustling leaves, and the babbling of the stream down below. The wind stirred the fallen leaves.

“Was it just one shot...?” I asked.

“Sounded like.”

“Could you tell what kind of gun it was?”

“Not from just that...”

“It was pretty far off, right?”

“I think so.”

Was there someone other than us here? There had been the unidentified victims of the Kunekune, Abarato (who had lived over here for weeks), and the US Forces trapped at Kisaragi Station, so it wasn't that surprising. Still, it brought a possibility that I hadn't considered in a while to mind, and I started feeling restless.

Dogs or bears were one thing. But humans with guns were a much more serious kind of trouble. The Otherside was just for me and Toriko. I didn't want anyone else here.

“What do we do?” Toriko asked. It took a while before I could respond.

What if we encountered another human being and they were hostile to us? Abarato had been friendly, but the next person we ran into might not be. Worst-case scenario, it could turn into a shootout.

Was that being too pessimistic? Maybe I needed to calm down a little. The person could be a fellow explorer, like us.

But what if they weren't sane?

Or what if they thought we were monsters from the Otherside, like that time at Kisaragi Station?

Hmm...

“If we do run into someone...I'd rather not get shot,” I replied.

“Do you want to make sure we stand out?”

“If anything, I'd prefer they not find us before we find them.”

The AP-1 was painted red and white. Red stood out in the wild, so it would help prevent us being shot by accident, but it wasn't good when it came to hiding.

“What do you think, Toriko?” I asked, and Toriko had an immediate answer.

“I think some degree of risk is unavoidable. We could probably get

a new paint job, but I think the noise is the bigger problem anyway.”

True enough. The sound of the AP-1’s engine stood out as obviously out of place in the other world. If we got close enough, it would give us away instantly.

“How hard we should try to hide is a matter of balancing risk against convenience. If you really want to be careful, we could stop riding the AP-1, put on camouflage, paint our faces with mud, and crawl everywhere... But do you really want to go that far, Sorawo?”

I shook my head.

“I figured. Even if we did all that, I’m not sure it would hide us from the non-human things here anyway.”

“Yeah... I get it. Let’s keep going as we are for now.”

“Okay.”

I started up the AP-1 and we kept going. The hill curved gently to the right, then eventually there was a big bend in the road. The incline grew steeper, and the engine got louder. I could tell the AP-1 was working hard. Once we got past the short, steep hill, we came to a slightly wider road.

It was paved. The cracked asphalt, full of potholes, was maybe wide enough for two cars to pass each other. On the side with the mountain there was a concrete retaining wall, and on the side with the valley there was a dirty, dented guardrail.

We stopped for a moment, looking left, then right. The road curved in both directions, but because of the dense forest on the valley side it was hard to see far ahead. If we went right, it would take us back in the same general direction we had come, so we went left instead. I put down a gardening pole with phosphorescent tape so we wouldn’t miss the road we’d come by on the way back, and then we started moving forward again.

This mountain road ran east to west, and we had been heading westward since leaving the ridge road where we’d seen the dog(?). The road we were on had a rather gradual upward incline. Our original goal had been to head somewhere higher up where we could survey the surrounding area, but there didn’t seem to be any breaks in the concrete barrier. Wasn’t there anywhere with a fork in the road that would take us higher?

As I was thinking that, I saw a spot up ahead where there was an indentation in the retaining wall on the mountain side. I had thought it was a fork in the road, but I was wrong. There were concrete steps climbing up the retaining wall. A sign for a bus stop stood at the bottom of the stairs, and an aged wooden bench sat next to it.

I stopped the AP-1 in front of the sign. We couldn’t read the name or destinations. Not because of text corruption, but because the sign was totally sun bleached. The timetable had suffered a similar fate,

with only the grid-lines still barely visible. The text had all been blurred by rainwater that had seeped in through a gap in the clear plastic board.

“Judging by the location of the ink stains, it looks like there was one trip in the morning, and one at night...” Toriko said as she crouched to look at the timetable. Then she stood back up. “You think the buses still run here?”

“Even if they do, we definitely shouldn’t ride them.”

I looked at the time. It was just past noon, so we decided that was as good a time as any for a break. We sat down on the bench together, lighting up a single-burner gas stove to boil some water. I pulled out my notebook and pencil while we waited, and sketched in the path we had taken here. The plan was to copy it all over to a larger map once we figured out how this all connected to the places we already knew.

Once the water came to a boil I turned off the stove and poured the hot water into our instant soup cups. I had sundubu-jjigae, and Toriko had clam chowder. We’d bought them at the convenience store on our way here along with rice balls and fish sausages. The rice balls were pollock roe, salmon, pickled plum, and kelp. We couldn’t read the labels, but we could still identify them by the color of the package and the pictures. While I was trying to decide which I wanted, Toriko said, “Let’s split them.”

“Oh, yeah, that’s an option too, huh?”

I wiped my hands with a moist towelette before breaking the rice balls in half. When I told her that the dried seaweed was soft and delicious after dipping it in my jjigae soup, Toriko got jealous.

“Must be nice. Maybe I should have gotten bread to go with my clam chowder instead.”

“I don’t think it goes that bad with rice, though? It’s seafood, after all.”

“I’ll give it a go.”

The way Toriko stared off into space, mumbling to herself about how the clam chowder and rice kinda worked together, but also kinda felt wrong somehow, was sort of weird and funny. It suddenly occurred to me that there were plenty of times I had seen her when her face wasn’t so beautiful, or she had an unguarded expression on it too.

Once we finished eating, we boiled some more water to make instant coffee. Deciding I should move around and let the food settle, I stood up, cup in hand. I crossed the road to look over the guardrail at the bottom of the cliff. I could see the glow of glitches here and there in the woods, but nothing moving. If I’d had line of sight to it, would I have been able to see that seemingly fake campfire from here too?

Turning back around, I looked up as I took a sip of coffee.

“Oh...?”

“What is it?”

“There’s something up there.”

Toriko came over to stand next to me and we looked up together. Deep inside the copse of trees on top of the retaining wall was a flat surface.

Toriko peered at it through her binoculars. “That’s a roof, I think.”

“Let me take a look.” I borrowed the binoculars to see it for myself. That was definitely part of a tiled roof on the other side of the branches. I had planned to climb the stairs from the moment I spotted them, but knowing there was a building right there made me feel tense.

I finished my coffee and picked up the trash before moving the AP-1 over to the bottom of the stairs. We put the blue sheet over it just in case it rained. If this were the surface world, people would have gotten really mad at us for parking at a bus stop.

We each checked our equipment, then looked up at the stairs again. They were steep and narrow, with green moss growing over the concrete surface.

I went first on account of my eye. Putting the rifle on my back, I climbed cautiously with my hands on the steps. When I reached the very top, I peered over the edge.

“Okay, there’s nothing there,” I called out, and Toriko followed me up.

At the top of the stairs there was a footpath partially buried beneath the undergrowth. Making a mental note to buy a hatchet for future expeditions, I used my rifle to shove the bushes aside as I continued down the short, straight path. There was a tall wall running alongside the path all the way into the distance.

The wall was made of old bricks and stood maybe two meters tall. There was a tiled roof on top of it. The brick wall had decorative blocks at fixed intervals, and it was possible to peer in through them.

I brought my face close to one such indentation. Unlike this shady path, it was bright on the other side of the wall. There was a well-maintained garden. It had a pond with a little bridge, and large garden stones. The small gravel path was lined with trees and flowers.

“Hmm?” I took another look with my right eye. Nope, nothing changed. It sure was a garden all right. This was so different from the ruins and incomplete buildings we had seen on this side before now that it actually made it feel unreal.

“What’s wrong? You’re making a funny face.”

“Could you take a look too, Toriko?”

“Sure, I don’t see why not.”

I moved away from the hole so Toriko could look in. When she

did, her eyes widened.

“W-Wow, that’s super pretty! It sure took me by surprise.”

“It looks that way to you too?”

“It’s a lovely garden. Never knew there was stuff like this in this world too.”

“It doesn’t seem like a glitch, but...it feels weird, seeing so many flowers blooming when it’s still so cold.”

“Hmm, I wonder.” Toriko looked a while longer. “It might actually be consistent with the season. The flowers that are blooming are plum blossoms, daffodils, and camellias.”

“Really?” I asked.

“I don’t know about all of them, but I think these are winter flowers. There’s still some snow piled up in the corner too.”

“So it’s not just an illusion? There really is a beautiful garden in there...?”

I looked up at the wall.

“Think we could climb it?” I asked.

“Want me to give you a boost on my shoulders?”

“Let’s try walking around first. There could be a way in.”

We had left the gardening poles that we used as markers back on the AP-1, so I stuck phosphorescent tape on the wall directly in front of where we had come up, and then we started walking. There wasn’t anything to suggest whether it was better to start going left or right, so we just decided to go right. Toriko and I were both right-handed, so it was easier without a wall on our right-hand side.

The wall eventually bent left, and the path with it. We occasionally stopped to look around, but nothing stood out as unusual. There was the sound of flowing water, so maybe there was a river somewhere nearby.

The wall bent left again. We went a little further, and suddenly came out into an open space. It was an empty gravel lot surrounded by pine and cedar trees. Looking up ahead, there was a large gate in the wall.

We cautiously approached the gate. It had an iron grate with a design like there was ivy wrapped around it, and there was a large, cast-iron door in it. The gate was wide open, and we could see a mansion through it. It was an old-fashioned building. I don’t know if it dated to the late nineteenth or early twentieth century, but the brick and plaster wall with a tiled roof showed a compromise between Japanese and Western design sensibilities.

Turning to look behind us, there was a steep hill paved with rough gravel. The branches of the dense trees on either side of the road covered it like a canopy, leaving it dark even in daytime. It felt it’d be a little scary to walk down that way.

It looked like there was another path if we kept following the wall, but I was more interested in the mansion in front of us.

“There any glitches?” Toriko asked.

“None...that I can see, at least.”

That the building was so normal actually made it creepy. I tried throwing some bolts, just in case. As they rolled to the ground on the other side of the gate, it kind of killed my enthusiasm a little. I was suddenly reminded of a doubt I'd had since I first learned about the Otherside. Maybe there was no other world at all, and I was just a deranged person, throwing around bolts and mumbling to myself...

Toriko looked around awkwardly too. “We haven’t wandered back into the surface world without realizing it, right?”

If we had, we could be caught red-handed violating the firearm and sword law, and were about to be trespassing in someone’s mansion too.

I looked around, then shook my head. “If this were the surface world, there’d be a lot more noise. Besides, it feels totally different here.”

“Yeah, I thought so... What now?”

I looked through the gate for a while. There was no movement. Nothing showed as strange in my right field of vision either.

“Let’s go in. I want to see for myself what kind of place this is.”

Toriko nodded. We passed through the gate and onto the mansion grounds.

3

I stepped from stepping stone to stepping stone along the white gravel path to the front garden.

There was a green lawn spread out on either side of us. The path carved through it like a white river, and there was a large, blackish garden stone at the end of it. Stone lanterns were placed at bends in the path. The pines in the garden were bright green and shapely, almost as if a gardener had worked on them. Straw mats were wrapped around some of the trees, and bamboo poles and rope made of straw had been used to create enclosures to protect others from the snow.

“This is different from what we usually see...” Toriko said in a quiet voice. “Buildings on this side always seem more ruined.”

“Yeah. It’s too neat and tidy.”

This place was too clean, too orderly. The buildings we encountered always either looked like they had been brought to this side from the surface and left to fall to ruin, or were pseudo-buildings that had been abandoned at some bizarre point in the construction

process. This mansion was different. No matter where you looked, it was properly maintained.

Unlike other places, nothing seemed suspicious here. At a glance, it looked like an oasis of safety, cut off from the area around it. Yet I still felt restless. There was no sign of danger, but it felt awkward being here.

Toriko seemed to come to some sort of conclusion. "Oh... There's nobody here," she mumbled.

That was what felt wrong about this place. If we wandered into a mansion like this in the surface world, we'd have heard at least some noise, like the voices and sounds made by the people living there. Even if we couldn't hear them, I'm pretty sure we'd still have this vague sense that there were people inside.

There was none of that here. The mansion looked perfectly lived-in, but it didn't feel like anyone was here at all.

Nothing happened on our way to the entrance. We came to a stop in front of a retro-style door made with wooden lattice and frosted glass. The hot spring hotel in Seibu-Chichibu had been old too, but this place looked better built and maintained.

"It's like the set of a movie," I said, and Toriko nodded.

"It feels too good to be true. Maybe when we go inside we'll find nothing but walls?"

"I guess we should take a look..."

Normally, it would have been dark on the other side of the frosted glass, and I'd have hesitated to open the door, but this time I could see it was brightly lit. I just didn't know how to feel.

I checked for glitches again before opening the door. I thought it might rattle, but the door slid open easily, like it had been oiled.

There was a small stone-paved entranceway with a raised threshold leading into a broader entrance hall. On the right-hand side of the stone floor there was a shoe cupboard that came up to about my chest. There were potted plants and a small porcelain puppy sitting on top of it.

On the other side of the threshold was a screen that made it so we couldn't see any further into the house. It was made from a single sheet of wood, the knots clearly visible, and had intricate fan and butterfly patterns carved into it. A hall continued past the screen.

I stood where I had been when I opened the sliding door, unable to move for a while. Normally, this being the other world, we should have been able to trudge in without saying a word. But this was clearly not a ruin. It felt like a house someone lived in.

Come to think of it, there wasn't a doorbell. If anyone's here, they probably heard the door opening, though...

I hesitated before taking a breath. "P-Pardon our intrusion."

My voice was quiet, probably because of how tense I felt. Toriko's eyes bugged out and she stared at me.

"Wh-What'd you say?"

"I was saying 'pardon our intrusion...'"

"What for?"

"It's a sort of 'may we come in?'"

"Never heard it before."

"Oh, yeah?"

"You surprised me. It made no sense to me, so I thought you'd gone nuts."

Yeah, maybe you don't hear it that often lately. Maybe it's unsurprising that someone born overseas hadn't heard it. I might not have used it myself since the times I went to deliver the community circular to the neighbor's house as a kid. That was the situation this reminded me of. Not that the neighbor's house had been nearly this impressive.

Anyway, there was no response. We cautiously entered the mansion and left the door open behind us.

As I looked down at the raised threshold of the entranceway, I was presented with another dilemma. The wooden floor was polished to a shine, and the idea of treading on it with dirty shoes seemed unthinkable to me.

"What do you think, Toriko?"

"About what?"

"My customs are telling me to leave my shoes at the entrance, but my reason is asking, 'are you crazy?'"

"Tracking in dirt can only get us in trouble if there are normal people living here. Seems pretty unlikely here in the other world, wouldn't you say?"

"Well, yes, but...this is our first time encountering a place like this here. I think we should consider the possibility that someone does live here."

"If someone does, they would have to have shoes of their own," Toriko said, opening the shoe cupboard.

"Whoa..." she said.

"Looks like they do, huh?"

There was a whole selection of shoes inside the cupboard. Sneakers, pumps, high-heels, men's leather shoes, running shoes for children, lace-up boots, sandals... The cupboard was full of footwear in a wide variety of sizes and styles.

"Wait, just how many people live here?" I asked.

"I don't think they do. These are probably all new," Toriko said, looking at the shelves closely. "They sure don't look used. None of them are dirty or scuffed at all."

Toriko closed the cupboard, seeming a little creeped out.

"Yeah, this place is definitely weird," she said. "Let's keep our shoes on."

"Hrm..."

Should we assume there are sane people here and act polite, or assume there were monsters and go in ready to fight? Reason tells me that Toriko's right, but still...

As I was hesitating, Toriko got fed up. "You can be polite about the weirdest things. You know that, Sorawo?"

"Hey, saying they're weird is uncalled for."

"Okay, how about this then?" Toriko took some plastic convenience store bags out of her backpack. We always carried a number of them with us because they were easy to use outdoors. "We'll put our shoes in these, and if things go south, we put them back on, and bail, okay?"

"Toriko... You can be pretty smart sometimes, huh?"

"Heh heh. I know, right?"

We removed our shoes and put them in the bags, then took the step up into the entrance hall.

"There are taverns like this. You know, the kind where you carry your shoes in with you," Toriko said.

"Sure are."

The plastic bags crinkled noisily as we carried them, but I accepted that as a necessary compromise. Besides, if we wore our shoes on this wooden floor, our footsteps would have echoed through the whole house. We weren't part of a special forces unit trained to move silently, so masking the sound of our footsteps had been beyond us to begin with.

With my assault rifle on my back and my Makarov in hand, I moved around the screen to head in deeper. I could feel the cold floor through my socks. In the hallway just past the entrance hall, there was a fusuma sliding panel on the right and a half-open wooden door on the left.

I knocked on the door on the left. No response. I pulled it open by the doorknob. There was a reception room inside. White couches were placed around a round wooden table. The red carpet had Chinese-style patterns sewn into it. Large windows were framed at the top with wooden arabesque fretwork. A cute chandelier that looked like a flower petal hung from the ceiling. By the wall, there was a tea cabinet with glass doors behind which I could see teapots, teacups, and other tea paraphernalia, along with small bowls, a flask for serving sake, and sake cups. A vase with a single branch from a plum tree decorated the top of the cabinet.

When I opened the fusuma on the right side of the hall, a warm

draft of air came out. This time, there was a Japanese-style room. In the middle of the tatami flooring, there was a sunken hearth with a charcoal fire in it. An iron kettle hung from a pot-hook attached to the ceiling, whistling and steaming.

“Boiling water...?”

I stepped over the threshold and into the Japanese-style room. Purple cushions were placed around the sunken hearth. In the corner of the room was a low, black table, and it had a snack tray stacked with apples and mandarin oranges.

The fusuma on the opposite side was wide open, and I could see into the next room. It was a large tatami room with rows of short folding tables. Lacquered vessels sat on top of them. There was black lacquerware, red lacquerware, and lacquerware with golden maki-e designs. They came in many varieties from soup bowls to lunchboxes, trays, cups, and vases used for flower arrangement. Everything looked expensive, but the way they were displayed seemed haphazard. It was less like they were on display, and more like someone had taken everything that they had out of storage, and they were in the process of organizing it.

“Hmm? Could this be...?” I mumbled quietly to myself. I felt like I’d read about a situation like this before.

I walked to the back of the tatami room full of lacquerware and opened another fusuma. This one led to a small, six-mat tatami room, with a hanging scroll decorating an alcove. It bore an India ink painting of mountains. Dim light shone in through the paper of the shoji doors. The room felt a little warm because there was a round fire bowl laid out on the tatami with a charcoal fire burning in it. It felt like someone had been here until a little while ago, and they just happened to have stepped out.

“Do you think there’s people here after all?” Toriko said, not sounding confident.

I thought about it as I responded. “I...may have figured out what this place is.”

“Huh? Really?”

“Yeah—I think this is a Mayoiga.”

Toriko cocked her head to the side when I said that. “Mayoiga? Is this more internet lore?”

“Nah, it’s older than that.”

Mayoiga is a well-known story from Kunio Yanagita’s *Tono Monogatari*, or *Tales of Tono*. The storyteller finds a luxurious mansion in the mountains. Whoever owns it seems to be wealthy, as there are many horses and cows tied up in the barn and chickens frolicking in the yard. When the storyteller goes into the house, he finds bowls and trays laid out for a meal, and there is freshly-boiled water and other

signs of human activity, but he doesn't see anyone. It is said that places like this are called Mayoiga, and if you find one and take one thing, or one animal from the house, you will be blessed with good fortune.

Tono Monogatari is a Meiji Era collection of strange accounts and legends from Iwate Prefecture, and a classic of Japanese folklore. Many of the stories record the names of the storyteller or the person who experienced the events. In some ways, you might say it's similar to our modern true ghost stories.

When I explained all that to Toriko, her brow furrowed with confusion.

"Um... So, what I'm hearing is that it's good luck to steal something from this place?"

"Well, that's how the story goes."

"Seriously? Is that okay?"

"It's an old story, after all. They don't all have to be reasonable."

"I don't like it..."

"In the original story, the person who found Mayoiga didn't take anything back. When he returned to his village, a bowl drifted down the river to him, and he got rich after picking it up."

"A bowl... Oh, so that's why. You thought of Mayoiga when you saw them, huh?"

"Yeah. The story goes that if you scooped rice into that bowl, it never ran out."

"Wow, that'd sure save money on your food budget."

Toriko didn't sound all that impressed, but she still turned to look back at the rows of lacquerware.

"So, you want to take one back like the story says?"

"Nah, I already looked at them with my right eye, and they don't shine silver, so they don't feel all that special. Even if we brought one back, it'd just be an ordinary bowl."

"Aw, shucks. Then we'd just be ordinary thieves too."

I crossed the room and opened the shoji. There was a small inner garden with a water bowl and dipper, and a square veranda around it. It was surrounded on four sides by similar shoji, and we could walk around the veranda to the other rooms.

"Pretty as this place is, it's as fake as all the other buildings in this world. This one just happens to look like a Mayoiga."

"When I thought it looked like a movie set, maybe I wasn't far off the mark."

Walking out onto the veranda, Toriko looked up at the square of sky cut out by the tiled roofs. I could see the reflection of the drifting clouds in the inner garden's water bowl.

"This place is good enough to be a heritage site," I said. "It feels

like it's been standing here for centuries."

"Yeah... What now? You want to leave?"

"Since we're here already, I want to look around some more. You don't get to walk around inside a Mayoiga every day."

"I knew you'd say that!" Toriko said with a laugh when she heard my response.

4

We went from room to room, looking around the (building that we theorized was a) Mayoiga.

The tatami rooms divided by fusuma panels were so clean and bright that it felt like someone had just finished cleaning them. All of the furniture, like dressers and wardrobes, was old in design, but still in good condition, shining with a black luster. There were kokeshi and other Japanese dolls, wooden bear carvings, and vases filled with flower arrangements here and there. It was hard to believe no one actually lived here.

I pulled open one dresser and inside were kimonos and rolls of kimono fabric. Toriko took an interest in them, but neither of us had any idea what to do with a kimono. If we pulled them out, I wasn't convinced we could put them back as we found them, so I closed the dresser without touching anything. I was a little scared to disturb a place as orderly as this.

We soon returned to the hall that was connected to the entranceway, and opened another door there. This one was a large Western-style room. It looked like a dining hall. High-backed chairs were placed around a long table. I counted ten of them. A chandelier hung from the ceiling, and lights modeled after candelabra were placed at fixed intervals along the wall.

I crossed the dining hall with a sideways glance at the trees in the yard outside the window, then opened the door on the opposite side. When I did, Toriko and I both let out sighs of admiration.

On the other side of the door was a kitchen. It was old-fashioned, with shelves made of wood, but there wasn't a speck of dust anywhere. The pots, pans, and cookware were all arranged neatly, and the built-in shelves were lined with bottles full of condiments and glass jars of spices. Herbs hung from the ceiling, giving off a fragrant aroma. The large, steel oven had a brick chimney that went up to the ceiling. It was so large that you could have roasted a whole piglet in there. Everything seemed to sparkle in the light that was shining in from the garden window.

"What a pretty kitchen..." Toriko mumbled. I nodded.

"This is amazing. It's like a super luxurious version of a Muji

store.”

When I said that, Toriko slapped me in the arm.

“Ow! What?”

“Can’t you come up with a better analogy than that?”

“Like an IKEA model room they really sunk a lot of cash into...?”

“Geez!”

“Ow! That hurts! You’re always so quick to hit me.”

“That’s your fault, Sorawo.”

“You sound like a domestic abuser when you say that, you know?”

To be honest, my actual first impression was different. It was like I’d wandered into one of the picture books I read as a child, but I was way too embarrassed to say that out loud.

“Besides, have you ever been to an IKEA, Sorawo?”

“Uh... No.”

“Didn’t think so. You’re always joking around like that.”

“How did you know I’d never been?”

“You don’t go to IKEA without a car.”

“You don’t have a car either, Toriko. Have you been?”

“Uh... Yes.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“How about we drop the subject?”

“Weren’t you the one who brought it up?”

“Fine, I get it. Let’s go there together sometime.”

“Fine by me...”

I have no idea what it was that she “got.”

There were two other doors in the kitchen. One was a back door leading out into the yard. When I opened the other, it led into a narrow hall. There was a staircase with a handrail. It turned at a landing before continuing up to the second floor.

Toriko sniffed the air. “Do you smell something tasty?”

“Now that you mention it...?”

I poked my head around the back of the stairs, and found another door there. Inside there was a storage room with huge hunks of meat-on-the-bone hung up. They looked like the legs of large animals. Through the dry, yellowed surface, I could see the red of the meat and the white of the fat. There was a large amount of dried meat hanging in the back, and it smelled delicious.

“Is that what you call whole bone-in ham?” I wondered aloud.

“Wow, this mansion just has everything, doesn’t it?”

“The way things are going, maybe it’s got a wine cellar too?”

“It just has to! If we’re gonna take something back, do you want to grab something from there?”

“But we haven’t even found it yet...?”

We decided to stop counting our chickens and go up the stairs that

we'd already located.

The second floor was large too, even if it wasn't quite as big as the first. It had a twin bedroom, a double bedroom, a washroom that was the size of a one-room apartment, a retro-style toilet with mosaic tiling on the walls... We were getting more and more numb to how posh this place was by now, but still came to a stop despite ourselves when we came upon one room.

It had walls filled with nothing but clothing racks, and there were all sorts of colorful outfits on display. There were even shoes and bags. You could probably open an apparel shop with all that stuff.

Is this what they call a walk-in closet? As I stood there admiring the sight, Toriko strode in, and started digging through the racks.

She's so careless... I thought, checking for danger with my right eye. Toriko, who had been oohing and aahing at the clothes, suddenly seemed to realize something and started acting serious.

"Oh? Huh? There's this, and this... Oh! Is that it? Hmm, I think I get it."

"What's up?"

"Look at this, Sorawo. It's neat."

I headed into the room thinking, *What's going on?* Toriko took an outfit off the rack and spun around, holding it out in front of me. It was a white, one-piece dress with a floral pattern.

"What...?"

"Hmm, no, that's not it," she said with a groan, returning the dress to the rack.

"What are you...?" I started to say, but before I could finish she thrust another hanger towards me. It was a super feminine lavender blouse with soft sleeves.

"Yeah... Not this either."

"Toriko-san?"

"Haven't you ever wanted to try on clothes like these, Sorawo?"

Toriko wasted no time waiting for my response before she went back to digging through the racks.

"Hey, hold on," I objected.

"This Mayoiga sure is amazing, huh? Did you notice?"

"What are you talking about?"

The third outfit she was holding when she turned back around was a navy blue, knitted one-piece that looked rather mature, like it would clearly show off the lines of your body. It would obviously never look any good on me, but Toriko pushed it towards me anyway. The way she grinned as I pulled away frightened me.

"S-Stop..."

"I'll bet the clothes here are a perfect fit for you."

"Huh...?"

Caught by surprise, I looked down at the knitted one-piece. *Is...it?* I wondered.

"They're all retro style, or vintage, I guess you could say. The fabric and tailoring are solid too. They'd cost us some serious cash back in the surface world. The way things are going, I'll probably find some that fit me. Since we're here anyway, why not try some of them on?"

"Whaaa..."

"Look, if we're gonna take something back, clothes must be a better choice than bowls or dried meat."

"Who was it that expressed disapproval about the idea of stealing something again?!"

"Now, now. Come on, put down your stuff."

"Wait, uh, you're serious about this?"

"If you like, you can pick out an outfit for me too."

"No, no, no."

"Now, now, now. Come on, take off your top."

Toriko closed in on me. She was weirdly into this. The look in her eyes was different from usual, somehow.

"L-Let's go to a changing room, at le—" I started to protest, but Toriko held up her index finger, wagging it at me theatrically.

"This is the changing room, Sorawo."

What's she so smug for...?

In my confusion, Toriko relieved me of my gun and bags, then stripped me out of my coat. It was like I was her dress-up doll. The room was pretty warm, but she didn't stop at my coat, and proceeded to remove my shirt as well, so I started feeling a lot colder.

"Achoo!"

"Don't move. Bear with me, here."

"Oh, sorry," I apologized reflexively, but Toriko wasn't listening. She glared at the frilly shirt and fluttery skirt that she had put on me, grumbling to herself. It seemed she wasn't satisfied.

"Okay, I've got it. Take off the clothes."

"Okay," I replied in monotone.

"Let's have you try this on next."

"Okay."

I had no idea what I was supposed to do now, so I just let her do as she pleased. If she were acting as weird as she had when we were in the hot springs together, I might have been able to shove her off of me, but this felt different.

She rapidly changed me from one outfit to the next, then Toriko's hands suddenly stopped.

"Yeah..." Toriko had a serious look on her face as she looked me up and down several times, then finally her expression loosened up.

"All done," she said, taking my hand and leading me to the mirror.

"Well?" she asked.

When you act so proud of yourself, I can't possibly give a negative opinion... I thought as I looked at the mirror.

"Whoa..."

My mirror reflection stared back at me in disbelief. I was wearing a Chinese-style one-piece with pink designs on a black and white base. Its short collar stood straight up, and the waist had a corset-like design. The sleeves were three-quarters length, and there were lace gloves on my hands (when did those get there?). The hem was at about the middle of my thigh, and I was wearing tights along with lace-up boots (when did those get there??).

Well, there was no worry of me giving her a negative response. Honestly, it was cute. I don't know if I'd say that about the person inside, but the clothes themselves? Absolutely adorable. They looked ridiculously good on me. Sure, it had a very "otaku" feel to it, like I was doing cosplay, but it fit the retro vibe of this mansion to a tee.

"Well?" Toriko asked again.

"Wow... It's cute," I answered in a daze.

Toriko's reflection grinned. "I know, right?! I just knew this kind of thing would look good on you!"

"What kind of thing?"

"This kind of cute outfit. I bet we could go heavier on the frills."

"No, no, no, no..."

I spun around in front of the mirror. My boots clacked against the wooden floor.

It's cute...

"Like it?"

"..."

"Sorawo?"

"This is so frustrating."

"Just be happy."

"I've never dressed like this in my life, so I feel uneasy. Can I take it off now?"

"No! You need to keep it on. I'm getting changed too."

"You too?"

"Hold on. It'll only take a sec. I found something for me while I was looking for your clothes," Toriko said, grabbing a number of outfits, then turned back to me. "Turn the other way."

"I'm the only one who has to? How's that fair?"

"Just do it, okay? About-face!"

She's so arbitrary...

I shifted my weight from left to right as I listened to the rustle of clothing behind me.

“Okay, all done.”

When I turned back around, Toriko was dressed like I'd never seen her before. She wore a shirt with the buttons done up all the way to the top, and had, well...I'm not sure how to describe it...it wasn't a necktie, or a scarf, it was this kind of voluminous, pleated piece of fabric decorating her chest. Over top she wore a jacket with golden buttons. It was a blue so deep it bordered on black, and the front hung open. Beneath she wore a slim pair of pants that were the same color as the jacket, along with leather riding boots on her feet. It reminded me of an old military uniform, and it made her look even taller than usual. The outfit came off a little cosplay-y, much like my own, but maybe all of the clothes in this room were a little out of date. Then again, since the person wearing them was already so stunning, I hardly noticed.

As I stared at her admiringly, Toriko turned around, lifting the hem of her jacket.

“Is it me?” she asked.

“You look so cool I'm getting mad.”

“Why would that make you angry?” Toriko laughed, reaching out with her white-gloved hand. I instinctively took it, and she dragged me in front of the mirror again.

“What do you think?” she asked.

“About what?”

“About the two of us?”

Looking at the two of us side-by-side in the mirror... The clothes looked good on us, and I had to admit that we made a pretty picture.

“Not bad, I'd say.”

“I know, right?! Oh, thank goodness. I'm glad you liked it.”

Toriko quickly lifted my hand. The inertia made me spin. As I stumbled, I found her hand around my waist.

“Huh? What? What?” I babbled as Toriko peered at my face with a smile.

“I just remembered I said I'd teach you to dance before.”

“Now?!”

“We could go looking for a ballroom.”

Eek... Her face, her face is too close.

Toriko's voice was a touch lower than usual. There was a gentleness in her eyes, and a confidence in the smile on her lips. It was like changing clothes had let her “get into character.”

I, on the other hand, had received no such benefits. I was just my ordinary self in a cute outfit. Just as I was about to go into panic mode, there was a scratching sound from the wooden floor.

Over Toriko's shoulder, near the entrance to the room, I came eye to eye with a creature I'd never seen before, and froze solid.

“Tori...ko.”

“Hm? Is something the matter?”

Unable to take my eyes off the creature, I moved just my face, signaling, *Behind you*, and Toriko turned around too.

“Huh?”

There was an animal on the other side of the door. Quadrupedal, and standing maybe eighty centimeters tall. It was covered in long, light fur, and had thin legs—actually, its whole body was generally thin. The black eyes at the end of its long snout narrowed slightly, and it stared at us.

“The dog from before...!” Toriko said in a small voice.

“That’s a dog?!”

“I’ve seen people walking them before.”

The animal was big, long, and thin, but now that she said that, maybe it was a dog. It certainly resembled the one we had seen off in that distant field.

The dog didn’t bark, but wasn’t acting friendly either. It just looked at us, unmoving. It was probably wary of us, but I couldn’t be sure whether it was hostile or not. I was scared that it might lunge at us if I made any false moves. As I stared at the dog, weighing our options, I heard a voice.

“Hana, what’s the matter?”

A slim, elderly lady approached from behind the dog, her steps echoing throughout the mansion. She had her gray hair tied back behind her head, wore a brilliant orange camo jacket, and had a gun resting on her shoulder. That was how hunters dressed.

When she saw us, the old lady’s eyes widened.

“Oh, my.”

Both Toriko and I were too surprised to say anything. In the time we had been exploring the mansion, we had gotten used to the idea no one was here. We had long since forgotten that the owner might show up.

“It’s so rare to see guests here,” the old lady said.

I suddenly snapped back to my senses. “U-Um, would you happen to live here?” I asked hastily.

“Yes.”

“I-I’m sorry! We were so sure nobody lived here...”

“Oh, my! It’s quite alright. Don’t fret.”

“No, I mean, we just let ourselves into a stranger’s house, then started going through her wardrobe...”

“No, no, it’s fine. Really. After all...” the old lady said, smiling mischievously. “This isn’t my house either.”

The old lady said her name was Todate and then led us downstairs.

“You can keep those shoes on. The clothes too. I think they look quite nice on the two of you.”

“Y-You’re sure?” I asked. “They’re dirty shoes.”

“Yes. You must have come in through the entrance over there, I suppose. The one over here is a Western-style entrance, so coming in with your shoes on is perfectly fine. It’s an odd layout for a mansion, though.”

Toriko kept quiet, leaving the talking to me. Her face was calm, but I knew better. She’d gone into her usual shy mode.

I was a little hesitant to do it, but just to be safe, I’d given them a quick check with my right eye. Neither the old lady or her dog had that silver phosphorescence around them or revealed a monstrous true form. The dog had turned her head towards me when I did it, so I hurriedly looked away. She must have felt me looking at her. Trust those canine instincts.

We followed Todate and her dog into a hall with a high ceiling. The stairs from the second floor curved as they led us down into the hall. Marble flooring, a dark red carpet, and heavy double doors. If we had come in through this entrance, I would never have even considered taking my shoes off.

Todate crossed the hall as if she knew it well and opened another door. It led to a small café-like room that had a number of round tables with chairs around them and a wall that was all windows. A wood fire in the fireplace kept the room warm.

“Please, have a seat. I’ll put on tea. Wait just a moment.”

“Oh, you don’t need to trouble yourself...” I said.

Todate left through another door. Her dog stayed behind, lying down in front of the fireplace, resting her jaw on her front legs. She looked even longer when she lay down like that.



Toriko looked at the dog. “What did she say the dog’s name was again?” she asked.

“The dog? I think it was Hana.”

“Hana! Hanaaaa!” When Toriko called her name, the dog turned her head towards us for just a second, then immediately looked away.

“Looks like she isn’t gonna warm up to me that easily, huh?”

“She seems pretty clever, so yeah.”

“Probably doesn’t wag her tail for anyone but her master.”

The dog looked like she was stretching out and relaxing, but I could kind of tell she was wary of us. If us intruders made any false moves, she’d be on her feet in an instant. I couldn’t help but feel nervous, having never been so close to such a large dog before.

It wasn’t long before Todate returned with a tray in hand. She wore a loose-fitting sweater, having taken off the orange jacket, and her gun was nowhere to be seen.

“I just made mugwort mochi. Would you like some?”

“W-We would.”

The mugwort mochi had that slightly warped shape you would expect from homemade ones. Since they were served on lacquered dishes with stylish toothpicks, they looked classy. I was still a little cautious, not yet knowing what Todate was like, but she seemed like a decent enough sort for now. Once she had taken the first bite, I cut off a little using a toothpick and ate it.

Yum!

As the grassy aroma of Japanese mugwort spread through our mouths, Toriko and I couldn’t help but look at one another. These tasted too good for them to be poisoned. Were these really homemade? If they were, then Todate was pretty talented.

The hot green tea she served us was sweet and went well with mugwort mochi.

While Todate was taking a sip of tea, a relaxed expression on her face, I spoke up. “Um, Todate-san. You live here, right?”

“Yes.”

“But you just said it wasn’t your house...”

Todate raised her eyes a little before responding. “Why yes, I did... If I called this a Mayoiga, would the two of you understand what I meant?”

Toriko looked at me in surprise. I nodded.

“We know about them, yes.”

“Well, that does make this a lot simpler.”

“When we found this place, I thought it was a Mayoiga too,” I said.

“Yes, of course.”

Toriko leaned in close to me. "Hey, is *Mayoiga* that famous of a story? Is it something everybody learns?" she asked.

"Er... I dunno."

"I remember being told it as a young girl," Todate said. "I got lost while hunting in the mountains, and the next thing I knew, I was here. You could probably tell from what I was wearing before, but I'm a hunter, you see. When I came across this house, I thought, 'Oh, I'm saved,' but when I came to ask for directions, there was nobody here. I assumed that the owners were simply out at the moment, so I waited, but no one came. Eventually, it occurred to me: 'Oh! This is a Mayoiga, like the one from the story!'"

Todate drew a circle in the air with her toothpick before continuing to say, "You know how the story goes? That if you bring something back from the mansion, you'll be blessed with good fortune? Well, it occurred to me that if I did that, I would probably never be able to return here."

"That's how it goes in the original story, yeah," I said.

"That felt sad to me. You see, I'm quite fond of this mansion. The layout is a bit strange, yes, but... Oh, that kitchen..."

"Oh! The kitchen..." Toriko mumbled, and Todate's face lit up like a child's.

"You saw it? Why, it's simply wonderful! Ideal, like something out of a dream or a picture book. I simply fell in love with it!"

"And so...that's why you took up residence here?" I asked.

"Why, yes, it is," Todate nodded, slightly embarrassed.

I was dumbfounded. Who would ever think to make a Mayoiga their house?! It wouldn't have occurred to me, that's for sure.

"So, what's your story? Did the two of you get lost as well?"

"No, we came across the mansion while exploring this world..."

"Exploring! My, my, it sounds like you've been having fun. So you weren't lost, but came here on your own? I wouldn't have thought it possible."

Toriko and I looked at one another.

"...Have you never gone home since coming here?" I asked.

"Never. If I left, I worry I wouldn't ever be able to come back."

"If you come with us, you can go home," Toriko offered, and Todate seemed to consider the idea for a moment.

"Hmm, if I ever find a reason that I simply must go home, I may take you up on that. I lived alone for a long time before coming here, and this is the ideal house for me, so I have no lingering attachments to my former life. But thank you," Todate said, looking at our luggage. "At first, I thought you were fellow hunters, but what you said just now makes more sense. That's not hunting gear, after all."

"Oh, yeah?"

“It’s those guns. The two of you are carrying some incredible rifles. They’re automatic, aren’t they? Like the kind soldiers carry.”

“Y-Yeah.”

“They don’t look like airsoft guns. Where did you get them?”

“We picked them up. Here on this side.”

To be more precise, I had permanently “borrowed” my M4 from the US Forces, and Toriko’s AK was a memento from Abarato, but those details would just complicate things, so I glossed over them.

“Oh, I see.” Todate seemed surprisingly willing to take my explanation at face value. “I’ve picked up a number of things myself. Guns. Bullets, too. I assume they were dropped by hunters who wandered in here, like myself...” Then, lowering her voice, Todate added, “Although, I do wonder what could have happened to those people.”

The fact that she didn’t call us out on our flagrant violation of the firearm and sword law actually left me more confused than it would have if she had. I’d always been under the impression that because of how tight the laws regulating hunters in Japan are, they were rather careful about how guns were to be handled.

Her dog snorted, adjusted its position in front of the fireplace, and then stopped moving again. Maybe she had started to feel hot after being toasted on just one side.

When she saw us distracted by the dog, Todate smiled. “She didn’t bark at you while I was away, did she? Hana can be so unsociable.”

“I’ve never seen a dog like her before. What breed is she?”

“I don’t have a breeder’s certificate, so I can’t be completely certain, but I believe she’s a Borzoi.”

That was rather vague. Toriko must have felt the same way. “You’re her owner, and you don’t know?” she asked.

“Ah, but there’s where you’re wrong. I’m not her owner.”

“Huh...?” Toriko and I both looked at her, bewildered.

“I met Hana after finding this place,” Todate explained. “She had a collar, so I suppose she must have wandered in here with her master. Whoever they were, they were nowhere to be found, and there was a torn-up hunter’s vest nearby, so a bear must have got them.”

“There are bears? We’ve never seen animals on this side.”

“Oh, yes, there are. I’ve yet to take down a bear myself, but there are a lot of animals,” Todate said, amused by the dubious looks on our faces. “It’s incredibly difficult to find animals hiding in the mountains. If even a hunter like me struggles with it, it might be impossible without training.”

“But we don’t even hear bugs chirring or birds singing...”

“No, you wouldn’t. It’s always unnervingly quiet. But the bugs and birds are there. They’re just hiding, you see. All of them.”

“Not just at night?”

“Once you get used to looking, you’ll see them even during the day. The way they hide is a little strange. It’s like they’re hiding in the blind spots of human vision... I’m not sure I can describe it very well.”

With a frustrated wave of her hand, Todate returned to the previous topic. “I brought Hana back here when she was weakened, and fed her... There was a picture of a flower on her name tag, so I decided to call her Hana, which means flower.”

Todate looked fondly at Hana as she spoke. Hana raised her head and looked back at her. For a moment, their human and canine gazes intertwined. There was a gentle warmth between them, like that of a couple who had been together for many long years. It caught me by surprise.

“These days, I don’t think I could bring myself to go hunting without her. I came back to Japan after losing my husband, and I’ve been alone ever since, so we may be similar in that way.”

Todate looked back to us, her eyes narrowing as she smiled. “Kamikoshi-san, Nishina-san, you two look like you make fine partners. Traveling around with guns, exploring together? Why, it must be great fun.”

“Yeah, I guess...” I said awkwardly.

I don’t know how she interpreted my response, but Todate smiled. “I envy you. If only I could have found a friend like that when I was younger.”

Hana snorted unhappily, as if she understood exactly what Todate was saying.

“Well, yes... I do think you’re a good partner,” she mumbled, and beside me Toriko broke into a beaming smile.

It felt like I was sitting next to an IR heater, the way waves of heat washed over me. I felt one side of my face getting toasty. Not wanting to look at Toriko, I turned my head away. My eyes met with Hana’s as she was stretching, but she heartlessly looked away, so it didn’t help at all.

“We heard a gunshot before coming here. Was that you, Todate-san?” I asked Todate in an effort to change the subject.

“Yes, it probably was. Did I startle you? I apologize. I found a deer and took a shot, but it got away.”

Toriko, seeming to remember something, said, “Come to think of it, I think we saw Hana before that. In a meadow below the mountains.”

“Oh, did you? I noticed she was missing. I wonder if she went out to have a look at the two of you,” Todate said, looking at Hana lying by the fireplace. “Hana is fast, so she goes off quite a long ways sometimes. On her own, leaving me behind. I worried at first, but I’m

sure she understands things better than any human, so I let her do as she pleases now.”

Todate let out a slightly troubled laugh before continuing.

“Oh, goodness me. Here I am, letting a big old hunting dog wander wild and free. It wasn’t long ago that I’d never have even considered doing that. In the time since I started living here, the lack of other people to see what I’m doing has really led me to let myself go.”

“There’s no one on this side, after all,” I said.

“That’s exactly it. Oh, now I’m all embarrassed. I used to have things far more together, you know?”

The way she bashfully pressed her hand to her cheek as she said that was so elegant. If this was how she was after letting herself go, I was practically a wild dog by comparison...

Suddenly, Hana raised her head. She went over to look out the window. That made me look outside too, but all I saw was the trees in the garden.

“Hana?” Todate called her name. Hana didn’t respond. Her attention was on something the rest of us couldn’t sense.

“What’s gotten into you?” Todate asked, rising from her seat to go place her hand on Hana’s back. Hana turned her head to look back at Todate. Their eyes met. “Something’s nearby. A bird, or a deer, perhaps.”

“How can you tell?” I asked.

“If it were a bear or a boar, Hana would be more alert.” Todate waved a hand at us. “Since we have the opportunity, do you want to go and see?”

“Huh...?”

“I’ll have to change into my outdoor clothes. Let me teach you how to find a living creature.”

6

Toriko and I hurriedly changed back into our exploration outfits before heading outside. Todate, who was waiting at the entrance with Hana, looked at us in amusement.

“Oh, you brought your guns with you?”

“Uh, yeah. Is that a problem?”

“No, not at all. It’s good to see you’re so motivated.”

Despite saying that, Todate was carrying her gun too. Maybe she figured that if we did find something out there, she couldn’t rely on Toriko or me to be able to hit it.

Hana began walking ahead of us. Todate followed as if it were natural for her to do so, and we trailed behind them.

The side of the mansion that we hadn't seen yet, the one with the Western-style entrance, had a circular driveway for cars. Here, too, the trees had been maintained, but not by Todate. They must have been like this all along.

Hana left the grounds and turned right, walking with a confident gait. She followed the wall until we reached the first gate that Toriko and I had come across.

Hana's face was turned to the left as she walked. She was keeping that dark, hill pathway—the one with branches growing over the top of it—in her line of sight. I thought that we might be heading there, but we kept going straight instead. Hana never took her eyes off the hill road, though.

“What's at the end of that road?” I asked, but Todate shook her head.

“I don't know. I've never gone that way. It's too dark to see, and I find it a little scary.”

That had been my initial impression too. “Oh, I see.”

“I've walked all around the area surrounding the mansion, but that place is the one exception. Hana won't go near it either. There may be some danger that I can't sense there, so I've made a conscious decision to avoid it.”

Hana slowed down at a bend in the wall. If we took another right turn here, we'd be back at the spot where Toriko and I had climbed the stairs from the bus stop. But Hana didn't go that way, instead stepping into the trees ahead of us on our left.

Todate turned back to us, a finger pressed to her lips. We nodded. Taking her cue from Hana, Todate slowed to a cautious pace. I followed along with Toriko, checking for glitches with my right eye as we advanced.

We avoided the underbrush, staying in the shadows of the trees as we headed deeper into the copse. There were small wet noises as we tread across the moist leaves on the ground. In the silence of the forest, even those were easy to hear. Todate would occasionally turn back to check that we were keeping up with her.

Hana's pace was relaxed, but it seemed she knew what she was looking for. As we descended a slope, her steps slowed, then came to a complete stop.

Todate crouched low and headed over to Hana. Hana lay down where she was. We had stopped behind the two of them, but Todate signaled to us, so we crouched down and moved closer.

Todate pointed up ahead.

“There. Do you see it?”

I looked in the direction she was indicating. There was a shallow valley at the bottom of the slope, and a stream narrow enough to step

over cutting through it. I could hear its babbling from here. The slope heading back up on the other side was much like this one, covered with little more than scattered trees. That didn't change under scrutiny from my right eye.

"I'm not seeing anything..." I said.

"Don't try to look too hard."

"Huh?"

"Stare vacantly, without focusing your eyes. It might be better to use your peripheral vision. Now try to move your head slowly, without focusing on anything."

I was confused, but tried to do as she said.

Stare vacantly, without focus...

"Oh..." I swallowed involuntarily. Something moved where there should have been nothing. The shape of a deer with antlers emerged from the background. It was about fifty meters ahead, beside the stream.

"I see it!" Toriko cried out, her surprise equal to my own. The deer raised its head, possibly alerted by us.

It was an odd way of seeing something. This was completely different from it being camouflaged with color or patterns. The only things I saw directly were the outline of the deer, and its movements. It was like an optical illusion, where even though I knew something was going on, my brain was still tricked. That impression grew even stronger as I tried to focus on its antlers. It was impossible to tell them apart from the shadows of the branches and leaves. I couldn't find the dividing lines between its body and the background.

"Is that thing really a deer?" I asked, but Todate did not answer. Her gun, which she had lifted into a firing pose, was pointed at the deer.

Todate fired. And a burst of smoke obscured our vision for a moment. On the other side of it, the figure of a deer stumbled as if pushed. It took one step forward, then its legs gave out and it crumpled to the ground.

Todate exhaled, lowering her gun and standing up. Hana rose too, then started down the slope. As we followed, I noticed I could now clearly see the fallen deer next to the stream.

Still alive, it struggled weakly with wheezing breaths. A red wound between its head and neck showed where it must have been hit. The shape of its face was kind of weird. Antler-like structures had developed around its eyes in several overlapping layers that were like the underside of a maitake or kikurage mushroom. It was like it was wearing a blindfold.

Todate drew a knife as she knelt down, grabbing the deer's antlers with one hand, and inserting the blade into its throat with the other.

The deer didn't so much as groan. When she withdrew the knife, the animal's ragged breathing stopped, and blood of a surprisingly deep color flowed out onto the ground.

Todate stood up. "You two did well."

That finally brought me back to my senses. "Wow... You took it down in just one shot."

"Not just one. Look," Todate said, pointing at another bullet wound on the thigh of its left hind leg. "This was the one that got away before I met the two of you. I was worried about it, so I'm glad it stopped here."

Todate took some rope out of her bag and began tying it to the deer's hind legs.

"What now?" I asked.

"I butcher it. It has to be done immediately, or it will start to stink."

Todate tied each of the deer's hind legs to a different tree, pointing the head downwards. The blood flowing out of the slash wound in its neck created a thin red stream. Todate stuffed some of the fallen leaves on the ground into the deer's anus, then took her knife again and began making incisions around the anus. At that point she turned to look at us.

"Are you two okay with this sort of thing?"

We nodded, and Todate went back to work.

She stuck the knife in its belly and made a vertical incision. Steam escaped, and there was a bloody smell. She reached in to grab the innards, pulling them out one after another. The long intestines came out together with the anus. Todate threw most of the organs aside haphazardly, but the heart was an exception. She washed that brilliant pink lump the size of a person's fist with water. Once it was clean, she cut off a piece with her knife and gave it to Hana. The dog received it as if it were hers by right. Then Todate cut off another piece and put it in her own mouth, like they were sharing a fruit of some sort.

"You eat it raw?!" Toriko's shocked exclamation was met with a mischievous grin from Todate.

"Just one bite. You shouldn't imitate me. I'm a bad, bad girl."

Having finished her share, Hana looked up at Todate with her dark eyes. Todate patted her on the head and Hana moved away again.

There it was again. That sense of closeness between them made my heart skip a beat. One touch, and one scrap of heart meat—that was all it was, but I suddenly felt like I was seeing something very private.

Todate put the rest of the heart in a Ziploc bag and resumed butchering the carcass. She removed the bones with an experienced

hand, slicing off hunks of meat.

"You two are used to using guns. That surprised me," Todate said without stopping her work.

"Huh? Why do you say that?" I asked, not sure what we were being complimented on. We hadn't fired a single shot.

"You're careful not to point the barrel at others. You'd be surprised how many people can't do that."

Well...maybe she was right. I'd been no good at it in the beginning, and only became more careful with constant warnings from Toriko.

When my eyes met Toriko's she gave me a smug look. I wasn't amused.

"I'd say that about does it," Todate concluded, her hands stopping. The deer was fully butchered, and there were now four skinned legs, and some vinyl bags full of red meat piled on the rocks at the edge of the stream. Looking at the time, it had only been thirty minutes. That felt like it couldn't be right.

All that was left were the cleanly separated skin, the head, the bones, and the organs. We were apparently going to take the head back, and bury the rest. With proper preparation, the organs were edible, but it was a headache to do it, so she only bothered occasionally.

We felt bad not doing anything to help, so we volunteered to help dig the hole at least.

The severed head of the deer sat beside Hana, watching us as we used branches to dig a hole in the ground. I didn't feel that strange camouflaging effect anymore, but those antler-like flaps over its eyes really were weird.

"What are those things over its eyes?"

"It's a mystery, isn't it? I thought it was a mutation or some kind of sickness at first, but every deer I've caught has been like that."

"Was there something they didn't want to see?" Toriko mused to herself.

"Like they were trying to avoid seeing something scary...?"

Once I said that, it hit me.

That might be exactly what it was. Todate said all of the creatures in the other world were hiding. What from? Not humans, that was for sure. There were generally no humans in this world, after all.

In that case... Was the other world exposing the deer to some kind of terror, like it did to humans?

Had they developed a structure that covered their eyes in order to escape that horror? It would take an exceptional amount of time for a creature's body to change like this.

Just how long had the Otherside existed...?

It was around three o'clock by the time we had carried the meat back to the Mayoiga. We were asked if we'd like to stay for dinner, and were tempted, but ultimately decided against it.

"We'll head back before dark today," I said.

"Oh, that's too bad. Do come visit again sometime. I'm always eating with Hana, but I'll make my best game dishes for you next time you're here."

I wasn't surprised to hear that at this point. This person was cooking and eating the animals she caught here in the other world.

"They may look a little strange on the outside, but the meat is proper meat," Todate explained with a smile, as if this was self-evident. "It will be delicious. I guarantee you that."

I didn't doubt her. With that fresh meat, her cooking skills, and the Mayoiga's incredible kitchen, how could it be anything but delicious? I really wanted to try it. Although it did make me think of the concept of Yomotsu-hegui from Japanese myth—where if you ate the food of the land of the dead, you could no longer return to the land of the living...

Just as I was thinking about that, she passed me a silver insulated bag.

"Here's your share of today's deer. I put some of the chuck and tenderloin in there. It should be simple enough to cook, so try it for yourself."

"Th...Thank you," I said.

"It should keep for a long time if you freeze it."

"Oh, okay..."

Forget Yomotsu-hegui, I was bringing meat from the Otherside back to the surface world.

Is this gonna be okay? Don't they seize this kind of stuff at the border?

Whatever the case, Todate and Hana saw us on our way as we left the Mayoiga. We climbed down to the bus stop at the rear of the mansion, boarded the AP-1 once more, and headed back down the road we'd come here on.

"Well, that was an odd experience..." Toriko said, looking back at the top of the mountain. I nodded.

"It felt unreal. Everything was so pretty, like we were in a dream."

"And then butchering the deer was so real."

"I'm surprised how fine we were during that. The smell was pretty intense, though."

"And the organs too."

We drove in silence for a while before Toriko spoke again.

"Sorawo, I thought you'd be more grumpy about it."

"Huh? Why?"

"You don't like it when there are other people in the Otherside, right?"

"Ohh. Yeah. For some reason, I didn't mind that much..."

"Did you have a change of heart?"

"I don't think that's it." I thought about it for a moment, then added, "It might be because those two are complete by themselves."

"Complete?" Toriko asked.

"She had no real interest in us."

"Huh? Really? She seemed nice to me."

"But I don't think she was interested in us. Todate-san only needs Hana, and vice versa. They have their own world, and their interest in other people doesn't extend beyond them being a way to kill time. That might be what made it easy for me to deal with them."

"Hmm... Okay."

Toriko gave a vague response that left me unsure whether she was convinced, then she held up the insulated bag. "What do you wanna do with the meat she gave us?"

"It's a bit much, even for the two of us. Maybe we should give Kozakura-san some as a souvenir?"

"Oh, hey, how about a barbecue party then? It can double as our afterparty."

"These cuts are big enough to make steaks out of."

"It'll take some courage to eat meat from the other world, though."

"I was thinking that too, but it's too late now."

"How so?"

"She said she made those mugwort mochi too, right?"

"Yeah."

"I'm thinking maybe the mugwort in those was grown on the Otherside too."

"Oh..."

8

After returning from the other world, I occasionally dreamed about the Mayoiga.

It was always the same dream.

Todate and Hana stood in front of the gates of the mansion, looking towards the dark hill road that led into the forest.

Something was climbing the hill, the gravel audibly crunching beneath it.

What appeared next changed each time.

An expensive black car with tinted windows that prevented me from seeing inside it.

An old ox-drawn cart.

A four-horse carriage.

A portable shrine carried by a large group of people.

A big, black, bear-like creature.

I never managed to see what expressions the person and her dog greeted them with before the dream ended.

Although we hadn't had a single frightening experience in that Mayoiga, every time I had that dream, I would wake up with my heart pounding.

File 19: Hasshaku-sama Revival

1

We shouldn't have come.

I chewed on that thought as I sat at a table in a café. Next to me was Toriko, brow furrowed, and an awfully worried expression on her face. Mine must have looked much the same.

The woman sitting across from us must have been in her early thirties. She had cleaned herself up a little, probably because she was meeting us, but her hair was a mess, her sweater was frayed, and she looked far more exhausted than her makeup could have hoped to hide. It all spoke to the great emotional burden she bore.

"I want you to search for my husband," she said as she laid out photos on the table. They were of a man in his thirties. He had on a clean white shirt, had short hair, and a clean-shaven face—he looked like the kind of guy who could have shown up in a TV commercial.

Nothing like when we'd met him.

Yes... Toriko and I had met the man in question. He'd said his name was Abarato.

It happened not long after I first met Toriko. We had entered the other world to search for Satsuki Uruma and encountered a man. He'd stopped a more ignorant me from stepping into a glitch, making him quite literally my savior.

Abarato claimed to have found the other world while searching for his wife, Michiko, who had mysteriously disappeared. He already seemed pretty unstable at that point; it was bad enough he mistook both of us for Michiko. I don't know if it took advantage of that obsession to do it, but an Otherside entity (in the form of Hasshaku-sama) took him away.

His photos were in front of us. Photos of Abarato before he was driven mad by the loss of his wife.

The woman asking us to search for him claimed to be that wife.

Michiko Abarato. The very same person he'd said had "met with a *kamikakushi*."

"It's been years since my husband vanished. My husband's name is Seiji—Seiji Abarato. We were alone in our house one night in October. I went to take a bath, and when I returned he was gone. The door was locked, and his shoes were right where he'd left them.

"The TV in the living room was on. There was a DVD case lying

open, as if he had been planning to watch a movie. It was *Stand By Me*. But the disc wasn't in the DVD player, or anywhere to be found. I contacted the police, of course. But there's been nothing. He's been missing ever since. The glass door to the balcony was closed too, but there was an unfamiliar child's shoe there, and the toes were pointing into the room."

Toriko and I were silent as we listened to Michiko's request. We were dumbstruck, unable to do anything more than exchange glances with one another. I don't think we were even managing to nod along.

"I'm sorry to have sent you a letter so suddenly. I was grasping at straws. I'm so grateful that you replied."

Everything Michiko Abarato said made sense. Nothing came off as suspicious.

She showed some signs of confusion, but anyone would be confused after their husband vanished.

Still... What was this I was sensing?

I tried to remember what Abarato had told us. Hadn't he said his wife disappeared on a summer night? That she had vanished from the dinner table while he was choosing a DVD? The pieces didn't seem to fit. It had been several months ago, so I was fuzzy on the details, but...

No, that's not it. That wasn't the problem here.

There was no question that the wife, Michiko, was the one who was supposed to have vanished.

So who was this person in front of me now?

I looked at Toriko once again. Her pretty brow was knitted with unmasked confusion and alarm.

"As I said in my letter, I started receiving postcards the other day. I believe they're from my husband. The pictures on them are all of places that meant something to us. But one of them, just one, had an unfamiliar picture. It was my only lead, but someone told me there were people who could search for a missing person."

I interrupted her. "You heard from someone...?"

"Yes. Um... Oh, gosh. Who was it? I'm sorry. I can't seem to remember who it was at the moment. I think you must know them, though, Kamikoshi-san."

I had no idea who it could have been.

Someone who can search for missing people...? Me?

Even if Akari was running her mouth, she wouldn't have introduced me that way. Everything about this was wrong. It was off, somehow.

"If you can find my husband, I'll pay any price. Please, I'm begging you. Help me, Kamikoshi-san."

There was a picture postcard on the table next to the photos of Abarato.

The photo printed on it was out of focus, like it had been taken by an amateur, and the shot composition was lazy. It showed a blue sky, and a ruin standing in a grassy field. A white building, full of holes, like dead coral.

I recognized the place.

That was where Abarato had vanished. The building in the other world where we encountered Hasshaku-sama...

2

“And why did that make you come to my house?!” Kozakura snapped at Toriko and me as we sat in front of her with awkward looks on our faces.

“We, uh, wanted to share the...sense of weirdness with you...” I said.

“Well, I don’t! What am I even supposed to do after hearing that story? It’s creepy.”

“We were hoping for an objective opinion,” Toriko explained. “Me and Sorawo are having a hard time looking at it with a clear head.”

“*Objective?*” Kozakura said.

“So, be honest. What do you think, Kozakura?”

“I think I never should’ve let you people into my house.”

“No, not about that...”

Kozakura glared at Toriko then leaned back in her chair. “I don’t know this Abarato guy, but when you met him in the other world, he’d already lost it, right?”

“Saying he’d ‘lost it’ might be a bit of an exaggeration, but he did seem pretty unstable at the time, yeah,” I said.

“In that case, doesn’t it seem more likely that the husband only thought that his wife had disappeared, but that was a delusion, and he was the one who actually disappeared? His wife is just looking for him.”

I cocked my head to the side. It was true enough that Abarato had been unbalanced, but the idea that he went crazy after losing his wife, and the idea he convinced himself he’d lost his wife because he went crazy were complete opposites.

“Is it possible for someone to convince themselves their wife’s disappeared?” I asked.

“It is, and it’s pretty normal.”

“Pretty normal...?”

Kozakura sighed at my confusion. “There’s a mental disorder called dissociation. Dissociative amnesia and dissociative identity disorder are two of the more famous examples, but—”

“So, memory loss and multiple personality disorder?”

“Those would be the common names for them, yes. When the mind, personality, and other aspects of our self that are usually all unified—at least to the degree we perceive that way—lose the function that keeps them all together, we call that dissociation, or a dissociative disorder. It’s often blamed on things like PTSD, being abused as a child, or undergoing some severe stress.”

For some reason, Toriko glanced at me.

“Huh?”

We immediately looked away from each other, and Kozakura continued.

“Dissociative disorders have a wide variety of causes, so it’s hard to generalize about them, but there’s a condition called dissociative fugue. People who develop it tend to suddenly disappear. Then they’ll turn up in another place, living a brand-new life.”

“A new life? What do you mean?” Toriko asked.

“Their personality up to that point changes, and a new personality, a whole new person is born. In some cases, the original personality suddenly resurfaces and they go home, but then they have no memory of the time they spent as the other personality.”

“What happens to the original personality while they’re living their new life?”

“It’s lost.”

“Where does the new personality come from?”

“I’d have to say that it’s created by the person’s brain.”

“Hmm...” Toriko thought about it, seeming mystified.

“So Abarato-san was experiencing dissociative fugue?” I asked.

“I didn’t say that. I only said it’s possible he convinced himself that his wife, who was still there, had disappeared. He might have taken on the personality of ‘someone who lost their wife to a mysterious disappearance.’”

Then, seeming to reconsider, Kozakura waved her hand. “That’s strictly an example. I’m not a doctor, and I don’t go around diagnosing people I’ve never met. The point is, humans can bug out surprisingly easily. And in some pretty weird ways too.”

Kozakura’s theory was a cautious one that didn’t step outside the bounds of what was realistic. If I didn’t know about the Otherside, I might have bought it. But for us, that was going to be the biggest problem.

“Kozakura-san, how would you explain it to his wife?”

“What do you mean?”

“Could you tell her ‘We met your husband, but in another world, not this one, and then lost him when he got taken out by a woman who was 240 centimeters tall?’”

“Well... It’d be a bit hard to decide how to word it,” Kozakura

acknowledged with a frown.

“Yeah, that’s the thing. Since the other world is involved, I have to assume something weird might be going on.”

“If you’re assuming there is, then how many times have I told you *not* to get me involved?”

“Well, you’re the only one we can count on...”

When I said that, Kozakura looked like she was ready to puke.

“Y-You okay, Kozakura?” Toriko asked.

Kozakura covered her face and shook her head.

“How did my life end up like this...?”

“Kozakura-san?”

“I’m all alone in this house, and my only guests are crazy women who have no clue how other people feel...”

“Why not try buying a cat?” Toriko suggested.

“Oh, should I go put on some tea?” I offered.

Kozakura let out a deep sigh, gazing up to the ceiling.

“The wife was sane, right?”

“Huh? Oh, right.” I was confused for a moment when she went back to the original topic, but I still responded.

“I don’t know if she’s sane, but...she didn’t come off as strange when we were talking to her.”

“Well, why don’t you believe her for now? If the husband and wife are saying different things and there was something obviously wrong with the way the husband was acting.”

“That would be the normal response, huh?”

“You got a problem with it?”

“No, I thought the same way...which is why I ultimately decided to accept Michiko Abarato’s request.”

Kozakura’s eyes widened when I said that. “Why?! You should just stay out of it. You two aren’t detectives or anything like that.”

“I wanted to set her free as soon as I could...” I said, looking down at the postcard in my hands. “I wonder what’s up with this.”

Kozakura recoiled, a look of displeasure on her face. “Is that the postcard you mentioned? Keep it away from me.”

“Oh. I looked at it with my right eye and it’s just an ordinary piece of paper.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about.”

As Kozakura and I were talking, Toriko quietly interjected. “If Abarato was the one who sent it, he might still be alive.”

Kozakura turned a dubious eye towards her. “And so what if he is?” she asked.

“Abarato might be calling out for help from the other world. Their stories are contradictory, but we can be sure that Abarato and Michiko-san are both suffering after losing their partner. We’ve got to

help them.”

“Yeah. Of course you’d say that,” Kozakura muttered with resignation then looked back at me and, in an off-hand tone, asked, “So...what are you going to do?”

“I think we’ll go there one more time. To the building in the other world where Abarato disappeared.”

3

It had been a while since we entered the other world through the building in Jinbouchou.

We followed the usual procedure in the elevator and arrived on top of the skeletal building. Every time we did it I found it strange how this cumbersome process was now an established way to pass through the gate. It was oddly consistent compared to the illogical nature of the Otherside.

Based on past experience, the other world wasn’t completely illogical. There was some otherworldly logic behind everything. It only seemed illogical because we couldn’t understand it. I suspect that the appeal of that unknown logic was the reason why a scaredy-cat like Kozakura found herself just barely unable to let go of her interest in this place. She and I were similar in that regard.

From on top of the skeletal building we could see that the snow had almost completely melted. Now that it was the end of March, even here, where snow lingered longer than on the surface world, it was starting to feel more like spring. The brown, flattened grass was starting to turn green again.

“It’s over there, right?” Toriko said, looking to the south. Hasshaku-sama’s building was visible on the other side of a vast plain.

I looked through a pair of binoculars—my own, which I had bought because it ended up being too inconvenient to keep borrowing Toriko’s. They weren’t that expensive, and I figured anything waterproof would do, so I just went to the outdoor shop and chose a pair I liked the design of. These were pastel blue, with 6x magnification.

I didn’t see anything moving. With my right eye, I could spot the glimmer of glitches here and there. I shuddered, thinking back to how I’d nearly stepped into one. That could have been the end for our adventures right there.

“Let’s go,” I said, lowering the binoculars, and we headed to the ladder.

Even though we did it every time, climbing a ladder down ten floors was always a pretty tense experience. By the time I reached the ground I was all sweaty. I unzipped the jacket I’d bought at Workman

and felt a pleasant breeze against my chest.

“Isn’t there anything we can do about this ladder...?” I wondered aloud. “I think using it might low-key be the most dangerous thing we do.”

“Maybe it is, but do you have any ideas?”

“It’s tough. I mean, considering the height.”

The skeletal building had no other way up or down—it was just support pillars and floors. There were no stairs, let alone an elevator shaft.

“Do you think we could attach a lifeline, then lower ourselves from the roof using a winch?” I suggested.

“We’re gonna hang in midair as we go up and down? Isn’t that scarier?”

“Hmm, you could be right.”

I’d never measured it, so this is only a rough guess, but if we assume three meters per floor, the roof had to be thirty meters high. You didn’t need acrophobia to be scared of that.

“It might still be a good idea to have a lifeline for when we’re climbing down, though.”

“Yeah. They use them on construction sites, so why don’t we go to Workman and take a look?”

“Oh, yeah. They do, huh? I’ve been thinking of mountain climbing gear.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“I think there’s gear like that for tree climbing too. Let’s do some research when we get back.”

“Good call.”

As we were chatting, we stayed on the first floor of the skeletal building and sorted out our equipment, as per usual. Makarovs, rifles, and nail bags. We were leaving AP-1 behind this time, so we’d be going on foot. I got my things together, put on my backpack, and slung the M4 over my shoulder.

“You good to go, Toriko?”

“Yeah...” Toriko responded, but she seemed to be looking around the first floor for something as she did.

“What’s up?”

“Whenever we come here, I end up looking to see if anything’s changed. Because this was our base back when Satsuki brought me here. I know in my head that she’s not coming back, but I can’t help myself.”

“...”

When I didn’t respond, Toriko looked at me and blinked. Her long, blonde hair sparkled in the sun. “Are you mad?”

“Not really.”

“Are you jealous?”

“Huh?”

I frowned at her, then turned to go. When I walked out of the first floor of the skeletal building, Toriko chased after me.

“Sorry.”

“What for?”

“I said I’m sorry.” She sounded pretty chipper for someone who was apologizing.

“I don’t think it’s anything you need to apologize for,” I replied without turning to face her, and Toriko grabbed me by the arm.

“Whoa?! Hold on!”

I’m carrying a rifle here! That’s dangerous! I glared at Toriko, but faltered in the face of her beaming smile.

“Wh-What?”

“You get jealous over me, huh, Sorawo?”

“N-No... It’s not like that,” I reflexively denied it, which only made Toriko happier.

“Well, why did you get so upset then?”

“Urk...” I had no response.

“Well, why?”

“J-Just drop it, okay? Let go of me. This place is full of glitches. It’s dangerous.”

“Okaaaay.”

Toriko let go of my arm like I asked her to, but she kept on smiling. What a goofy grin.

Well, maybe I am upset. Why is that? Well...

I started making excuses to myself for a second, then stopped.

Well... Well, what? Well... To be honest, it’s because I don’t like it when Toriko gets sentimental about Satsuki Uruma. Now, as for why I don’t like that...

Because Satsuki Uruma’s turned into a monster, but Toriko still has lingering feelings for her?

Because Satsuki Uruma was always a no-good bitch who was manipulating her from the get-go?

That’s part of it, but there’s a more fundamental reason...

It’s because Toriko really loved Satsuki Uruma.

Even more than she does me...?

When my train of thought reached that point, I felt this intense tightening feeling in my chest.

There was nausea, unease, loneliness...

Anger.

I stopped, still looking at the glitches that were dotted around up ahead, as I was unable to move for a moment. It felt like something that had been bubbling away inside me all this time had suddenly

boiled over when I looked at it.

I wanted to scream.

Was this sensation what people usually called jealousy or envy? But I'd been feeling it for a long time now. Since right after I met Toriko. Yeah, by the time we had encountered Hasshaku-sama, I was already feeling it...

Did that mean I was already jealous then? I was jealous all this time and never realized?

"Having trouble?" Toriko walked up beside me, squinting to see what I was looking at. "I can't see them. Are there a lot of glitches? You want to take a different route?"

When I stood there not saying anything, it must have looked to Toriko like I was agonizing over what course to take. I shook my head vigorously.

"No, it's fine. We can go."

"Okay. I'm counting on you." Toriko touched me on the back with her right hand. That slight physical contact gave me the push I needed to get walking.

I don't have time to dwell on things. If I don't focus, I'm gonna step into a glitch and wind up dead.

As I tried to convince myself of that, Toriko called out from behind me, her voice full of cheer. "Remember the last time we came through here?"

"Well, yeah, of course I do."

"You were in a bad mood then too."

"..."

"I had so much going on at the time that I didn't notice it, but thinking back now, Sorawo, I'll bet you were jealous—"

"Huh?! There's no way!" I cut Toriko off, my voice sounding so shrill it surprised me. Then, clearing my throat to try and cover it, I tried again. "There's no way I would be. We'd only just met. I couldn't possibly have been jealous."

"Well, why were you in a bad mood then?"

"I don't remember."

"Aww, that makes me so sad. I remember. Everything."

She's getting carried away...!

"Oh, shut up! Let's hurry up and—"

"Whoa there."

As I tried to angrily stride off, Toriko suddenly grabbed my shoulders hard from behind.

"What?!"

"It's dangerous to rush. Look."

She pointed over my shoulder to a mound of ash on the ground. It was a gently sloping pile, about one meter across.

A toaster. The same glitch that almost cooked me to death once before.

"You're just as good at getting yourself into danger now as you were back then, huh?" Toriko said in the most innocent of tones.

I managed to force out the words, "This place is full of glitches. Let me focus."

"Okaaaay," Toriko said as she released my shoulders.

I took deep breaths, trying to calm myself down, then began moving forward again.

Looking around, Toriko hesitantly asked, "This is where we met Abarato too, isn't it? It was a good thing he called out to us."

"Yeah."

"He said he'd been on this side for weeks, so do you think he had a campsite near here, maybe?"

"Now that you mention it, he wasn't carrying a tent, huh?" I asked.

"You want to take a look? There could be clues."

"Hmm. Well, it seemed like the first time he'd gone into that building, so maybe he traveled from somewhere far away," I said, looking towards the white building poking out of the copse of trees that was up ahead on our right. If Abarato's base had been somewhere around here, it was hard to imagine he wouldn't have visited a building that stood out so badly.

"If he did, then it really was a coincidence he found us."

"I think it was only half coincidence."

"What do you mean?" Toriko asked.

"Abarato talked about some kind of pseudo-humans, remember?"

"He said there are things that imitate humans lurking around, yeah. You think he meant something like the moss men and the Horned Man at Kisaragi Station?"

"He could've. So, anyway, he had a gun, right?" I said.

"Yeah."

"And he mistook me and you for his wife, right?"

"Yeah..."

"Maybe he'd already found us before then, and he'd been approaching without us realizing it. To see if we were his wife, or if we were pseudo-humans. One wrong step and he might've shot us."

Toriko was silent for a moment. "Never thought of that," she said, sounding surprised.

"Well, it could just be me being cynical."

"Why'd it never occur to me? I mean, he was a dodgy guy with a gun. I was wary of him at first too."

"It's because you sympathized with his story."

"What's wrong with me? I need to keep it together..." Toriko's

almost annoyingly chipper attitude took on a shadow as her voice clearly fell with disappointment. When I turned back to look at her, Toriko had stopped walking and was staring down at her rifle.

"I always thought I'd have to give Abarato his AK back if we found him, but..." Toriko raised her face, her voice resolute. "Nuh-uh, he's not getting it back after all."

"Uh, you don't have to boldly declare your intention to steal it." I didn't know whether I should laugh or not. "Listen, what I said just now was just something that I came up with on my own. Sure, he was acting a bit weird, but I could be tarring him unjustly. It's entirely possible that he was just acting out of benevolence."

"Still, I can't believe myself. Dropping my guard like that just because his situation was similar to mine. If that had gotten you killed, I—"

She still seemed torn up over this, so I let out an exasperated sigh. "It's in the past. Time to move on. We both survived in the end."

"..."

"If you really want to reflect on what you think you did wrong, save it for the afterparty. I'll even pretend to listen to you."

"*At least* listen!" The shocked look on her face was so hilarious I burst out laughing. She pursed her lips, as if hurt.

"Let's just chalk it up to both of us being prone to getting ourselves into trouble back then," I said.

"Yeah, maybe you're right."

"Though, maybe that hasn't changed that much."

"I don't think it has."

"Well, I'd say it's changed at least a little."

"How so...?"

When she asked that, Toriko's voice had regained some of the teasing tone from earlier. I sensed she was about to get annoying, so I turned around without answering her. "Come on, let's hurry. No point in wasting time here."

"Okaaay."

4

After throwing a lot of bolts, we made it out of the grasslands and stopped to rest at an opening in the trees. There was about twenty meters or so of bare earth between us and our destination: the white coral building. Its outer face had a number of round holes in it, making it look even more like dead coral than the last time we came here.

There were no glitches between here and the building. Last time, Hashshaku-sama's strange "footsteps" had left marks in the dirt, but I

didn't see any sign of them now. We spent some time watching the area, but there didn't seem to be anything unusual going on.

"Okay... I guess we should head in, then."

"Ah! Hold on." Toriko urgently grabbed me by the left arm just as I was about to step out of the trees.

"Something up?"

"Let's hold hands."

Why's she suggesting a silly thing like that now? I thought, but the look on Toriko's face was serious.

"Remember last time? You got tricked like Abarato and started wandering towards Hasshaku-sama, Sorawo."

I didn't know what to say to that.

"That was, uh...well, I didn't know as much back then. Besides, Hasshaku-sama's probably already gone, right? I mean, we sorta dispatched her last time."

I felt so childish arguing like this.

"Yeah, but we were just talking about how Abarato's postcard could be a trap to lure us here, right? We should be cautious. I don't want to lose you like that, and I want you to stop me if I'm the one who gets tricked."

"Urgh..."

She was being more direct than I'd expected, so I relented. What Toriko was saying did make sense.

"Okay..." I agreed.

"Good."

With a smug nod, Toriko wrapped her fingers around mine. We were both wearing gloves, so all I felt was fabric, but she seemed pretty satisfied.

"We'll be fine if we stay like this. Right?" Toriko said.

I didn't want to drag this out any longer, so I just sort of vaguely agreed with her.

Maybe it would have been better if I'd let her stay depressed earlier...

We approached the white coral building, hand-in-hand.

It was a long, three-story building reminiscent of a school. Maybe it was a little like the residential building on the Farm too.

"Was it this full of holes last time we came?" Toriko asked as she looked up at the building. I shook my head. There weren't all these round holes gouged out of the outer wall last time we were here.

"The place may be more prone to collapsing now, so watch your head," I cautioned her.

"I wish we had helmets."

"Let's add them to the shopping list."

I peered in through the open front door. There was no floor, just the bare ground, and rubble scattered across it, the same as before.

What was new was that there were now a large number of thin logs lying around.

I held my Makarov in one hand, remaining alert as I walked in. The building was an open space, with no walls or support pillars. Since all the floors above already collapsed away, I could see all the way up to the third floor's ceiling. This was an empty concrete husk. I remembered there being some kind of wooden scaffolding last time, but that was gone too. The logs I was seeing scattered around must have been what was left of it.

Sunshine shone in through the broken windows and through all the holes in the walls and ceiling.

"Those holes... They look too clean for them to have formed from natural decay, don't you think?" Toriko said, her voice echoing through the wide open space.

One possibility occurred to me. "Remember how all those black orbs erupted out of Hasshaku-sama when we shot her?"

"Huh? Did that happen?"

"Maybe I was the only one who could see them. I didn't feel anything when they touched my body, but maybe they did this when they hit the building."

"Then do you think that's when all this wood collapsed too?"

Toriko rolled a nearby log with her foot, revealing a sharp, round cut in the end of it. The curved edge was as smooth as if it had been polished.

When we defeated Hasshaku-sama, we suddenly found ourselves back in the surface world, but maybe here in the Otherside things had gotten really hectic with scaffolding collapsing and the building getting shot full of holes. If we hadn't gone back right then, we could have been caught in the collapse...

Toriko seemed to be thinking the same thing I was, saying, in a low voice, "We were in real danger."

"Yeah."

I unconsciously held her hand tighter. I'd looked back on dangerous situations and shuddered plenty of times before now, but when I thought about how an accident here could have taken either one of us from the other, I felt a chill in the bottom of my stomach.

Walking carefully across the unstable rubble, I stopped to look down at the ground. There were a number of marks that looked like it had been repeatedly struck with wooden mallets.

"You think this is it? The spot where Hasshaku-sama was?" I asked.

"Looks like."

There had been too much going on at the time to get a good look around the place back then, but this was probably it. These were the

footsteps of Hasshaku-sama's other form, the pseudo-torii.

I focused my consciousness on my right eye. I'd assumed that I would see the silver haze that indicated the location of a gate, but there was nothing.

"Well?" Toriko asked.

"I'm not seeing anything."

"I'll try searching too."

Toriko removed her glove, revealing her transformed left hand. She moved her hand as if stroking the air, and the sunlight bounced around inside it making it sparkle and shine. If you looked at the bright spots, you could see crystal-like patterns inside her transparent limb. So beautiful...

Toriko had her eyes closed, maybe so she could focus on her sense of touch. I held her hand as she moved around like she was dancing underwater and slowly moved with her.

"I kind of feel something tugging on my fingers..." Toriko said, furrowing her brow. "But if you told me it was my imagination, I might have to agree with you. It's like I'm feeling the last dregs of a gate floating around."

"The last dregs..."

It was such an odd turn of phrase that I smiled.

"Hm?" Suddenly, Toriko stopped moving. "There's something over this way..."

"A gate? Is it here?"

"No, not here. But I feel something from this direction," Toriko said, eyes still closed. The furrows in her brow deepened. "It's like wind pressure...and...it's gradually getting stronger. Is it coming closer?"

The palm of her translucent hand was turned towards the entrance that we had come in through. I looked over there, my eyes suddenly narrowing. Something was wrong with the door. The shape of the door frame, with the light behind it, looked off somehow. Was that roundish mass sticking out from the left-hand side always there?

"Eagh..."

Realizing what the mass was, I let out a choking sound.

That's a person's head.

The head, bent at a ninety degree angle, was sticking out from the door frame. Its long, wild hair reached all the way to the ground. The face was shadowed, so I couldn't make out its expression.

The head moved sideways, and the body appeared.

It was a woman: her arms, legs, and torso were twisted and smashed. She was long and thin, as if she'd been stretched out. If she weren't all twisted up, she'd have easily been over three meters tall.

"Urgh..." Toriko groaned next to me. She must have opened her

eyes when she realized the sound I'd made indicated that something had gone wrong.

The bent woman came in through the door, stumbling into the building. The reason I hadn't been able to see her face wasn't because of the backlighting, or because it was hidden by her hair. It was because her head was twisted around backwards.

The soiled clothes that she wore had once been a long one-piece dress, but it had been ripped and torn when her body was twisted and broken. She wore just one high-heeled shoe, and her other bare foot had a broken ankle. It was causing her to lurch with each step. She let out *po, po*, sounds, like bubbles popping, at irregular intervals. That was her voice, apparently.

My chest constricted with an intense feeling of nostalgia, and my eyes grew wet with tears.

I always wanted to come here. To see you again.

Why did I forget?

Why...?

I shook my head.

There was no reason for this. This whole feeling of nostalgia was a lie. A ruse with no substance to it at all.

"You okay, Sorawo?"

"How about you, Toriko?"

"I'm managing. Hey, do you think this could be...?"

"Yeah. It's Hasshaku-sama!"

She was in a sorry state, but it was probably her. Our last encounter must have done a number on her appearance. Grotesque as she looked now, I don't think even Abarato would be fooled by her.

And yet, in contrast to her horrific appearance, the feeling of nostalgia assaulting us was actually stronger than before. It carried no information, only an intense longing for home, bearing down on us with an almost physical pressure.

"I'm amazed you managed to resist back then, Toriko."

"It was partially because I was worried about you, but...I also noticed pretty fast that she was acting weird for Satsuki."

"How so?"

"I've never seen Satsuki wear white."

There was a tone of certainty, and of pride, in Toriko's voice that made me unreasonably angry.

"Sorawo?" she called out to me, voice full of concern, and I looked up.

"I'm fine. Let's hurry up and take her down. We've done it before, and we can do it again the same way."

I chased off the unpleasant feelings, gripping Toriko's hand tighter to resist the fake nostalgia. She squeezed back. It felt so reassuring.

“I won’t let go,” Toriko said.

“Yeah.” I nodded, focusing on my right eye.

The image of Hasshaku-sama lumbering towards us with irregular motions blurred, then changed.

What I saw there looked like a smashed jungle gym. It had been like a torii gate when I’d seen it before, but this was totally different. The structure was more complicated now, bent, broken, and wrapped around itself.

That disfiguration came with an increase in size. The irregular shape had grown to more than three meters high and three meters across. There was a strange amount of depth too. It felt like it stretched on forever.

The frame of the jungle gym changed every time I blinked. There was also a thin, translucent film spread out inside it, like the surface of a bubble, sparkling with silver phosphorescence. I could see other scenes projected in that membrane.

A ruined shrine... An abandoned camp site... Kozakura’s front door... Old city streets... Running mannequins... A torii gate in the mountains... A mound with a large stone... A bridge over a valley... A mountain road blocked off with chains...

The film would occasionally rupture, bursting with a little *po* noise.

In all these changing scenes, I would occasionally spot a small figure. Petite, childlike. The figure’s hair was long, so maybe she was a girl...

The girl turned around. When I saw her wide eyes, it shocked me.

Our eyes met! I was sure of it. We’d just seen each other across the thin film.

The girl turned and ran off. Or so I thought, but then she crossed another membrane. Wondering where she’d go next, I searched for her figure, my eyes racing around the structure.

There! She was running through some tall grass, her legs getting trapped in the water. She turned to look in my direction, her face filled with terror.

“Toriko. I see a child inside Hasshaku-sama,” I said.

After a moment of silence, Toriko asked, “A real human?”

“She looks real. And she seems scared. She may have wandered into the Otherside.”

“Can we save her?”

I figured you were going to say that.

Not that I had any objection. I’d have trouble sleeping at night if I just decided to pretend I hadn’t seen anything. Besides, child or not, I didn’t need any unwanted humans wandering around in the other world.

To be completely honest, the thought of “we’ve gotta help her” came almost reflexively. It felt weird and not typical of me at all, though.

“I dunno...but we’re gonna give it a shot,” I said.

“If you need my left hand, just say the word.”

“Okay. Keep holding on to me until then.”

“Okay.”

We already knew how to dispatch Hasshaku-sama. I just had to have Toriko stick her hand inside while I was watching and destroy the gate, the same as last time. Its shape had changed a lot, but the same method would probably still work.

But is that really okay? What if the girl I found is on the other side of the gate? Wouldn’t wrecking the gate make it impossible to find her again?

As my eyes raced, desperately not to lose the girl, there was an odd thought in one corner of my mind. *Why do I find it so hard to leave her alone?* In the middle of all the silver sparkles, I couldn’t make out her face that well. And yet, from the first moment I saw her, I sensed I needed to help this little girl.

Even though I hate kids...

As the fleeing child traveled from membrane to membrane, my eyes were pulled deeper into the warped jungle gym. With my attention focused into my right eye, I gradually lost track of where I was. Feeling uneasy, I called out to Toriko.

“You still holding on to me?” I asked without looking back. I felt a hand on my right. Its large, soft palm felt reassuring.

“I won’t let go.”

“Yeah,” I responded, then suddenly noticed something was off.

My right hand...?

But wasn’t Toriko holding my left hand?

“Sorawo, get away!” Toriko’s shout came from behind me.

I reflexively looked up, and the back of Hasshaku-sama’s head was right in front of my eyes. The way her neck was twisted left strange, unsettling wrinkles in her skin.

“I won’t let go.”

Hasshaku-sama’s fingers wrapped around my right wrist.

“I won’t let go,” she repeated in Toriko’s voice.

My face flushed red with anger.

She got me! I’d been tricked again! And after I’d been so careful!

Disgust and anger won out over fear. Almost reflexively, I pointed the Makarov in my right hand at Hasshaku-sama.

The hand on my wrist did not let go. Her twisted neck turned around. The wrinkles deepened. The black hair swished, revealing her hidden face.

Hasshaku-sama’s face was flat, as if it had been sliced off. What I

had my Makarov pointed at was a completely flat, shining blue surface. The egg-shaped outline of her face was the edge of a gate membrane, drawn taut.

That thin film trembled, then burst.

Po!

Then, there was an even louder bang.

5

My vision suddenly flashed red. It was so blindingly bright that I reflexively shut my eyes.

I tried to cover my face, but my arm wasn't moving the way I wanted it to. My right hand felt heavy. My left did too. Someone's fingers were wrapped around mine. *I'm caught?!* I panicked for a moment, screaming as I swung my arms around.

"Sorawo! It's dangerous! Don't move!" came a shout from right next to me.

It's Toriko! My eyes snapped open. I looked at my right hand. No one was holding it. The weight in that hand was my Makarov. Noticing my finger still on the trigger, I hurriedly removed it.

I looked to my left. Toriko was looking at me, her eyes wide.

"Tori...ko."

As I said her name, Toriko nodded repeatedly, her eyes never breaking contact with mine. She was holding my hand, clutching it so tight it hurt.

I was still feeling numb in the aftermath of my panic, but I turned my head around slowly. Finally, I could see what was going on around us.

We weren't in the white coral building. We were outside. There was a well-trodden dirt road at our feet, and an old-fashioned town spread out to either side. The setting sun dyed everything in tones of crimson.

Hasshaku-sama was nowhere to be seen. It was just me and Toriko, alone, our ragged breaths echoing across the quiet street.

"My hand...hurts," I said, and Toriko loosened her grip just a little. She wasn't about to let go, though.

"What happened? Did we get sucked into the gate...?" Toriko asked. I bit my lip, letting out an irritated sigh.

"Sorry. I was stupid. She totally tricked me."

"You saw a child, right?"

I shook my head hard. "There was no child. It was a trap to draw me in. No wonder it seemed strange. The moment I saw her, I thought, 'We've gotta help her.' There's no way I'd ever think that."

"You...think so?" Toriko cocked her head to the side. I felt crushed

under the weight of my own guilt.

"I screwed up. I'm so sorry. I got you caught up in my mistake too."

"That's what you're going to say?" Toriko's voice was low. Despite holding my hand all this time, she suddenly let go. My sweaty palm felt clammy when exposed to the air.

Yeah, she's mad. Of course she is. What do I do now?

"Sorry... It was all my fault..." I was saying, eyes downturned, when she suddenly pinched my cheeks.

"Ow?!"

Toriko forced me to raise my face and look at her. While I was getting flustered over how close she was, Toriko, brow still deeply furrowed, said, "Hey. Don't you think it's a little late for that?"

"Ow..."

"Talking about how either of us got the other caught up in anything? We're well past that point, Sorawo. We're in the closest kind of relationship in the world, aren't we?"

I felt like she put a lot of extra emotion into that last sentence.

"I'm glad we were holding hands," she continued. "Because it meant you didn't get sent to a scary place alone. If you'd vanished, leaving me behind, I don't think I'd have been able to forgive you."

"Phew."

"You understand? If you do, then never apologize again. I'll get mad."

Toriko kept stretching my cheeks as she spoke. Her words were strong, but her fingers were playful.

I tried to tear my face free, but my resistance may have looked weaker than usual to her. Toriko stared down at me coldly.

"If you feel that bad about it..."

Toriko's face suddenly got a lot closer.

"Mmph?!" With no time for me to close my eyes, our lips touched...then parted again.

Freed from her hands, I stumbled backwards. As I covered my mouth and stared at her, Toriko said, "Let's call it even with that."

Throwing me a smug look as I quivered, Toriko spun around and began surveying the area.

"Now then... Where are we?" she asked.

"How should I know?!"

"Don't get mad."

"Wh-What gives you the right to..." The lingering sensation on my lips was maddening.

She did that so easily... Like it was nothing... Damn it...!

I could glare at her all I wanted, but Toriko wasn't looking at me. It took me some time before I was able to change gears and start

looking around the area again too.

The old-fashioned street stretching out to either side of us hit me with a heavy dose of nostalgia. The tiled and corrugated metal roofs, the wooden telephone poles, the simple, metal-framed sliding glass doors and lacquered walls, and the wooden fences with their paint peeling in places... It all felt very "Showa," you might say. But that was before my time, so I wouldn't really know. I couldn't read any of the rusty enamel signs bearing the names of the stores.

I looked down the road and gulped. There was a bright red sun visible above the rooftops. It looked massive. I know the sun always looks bigger when it's closer to the horizon, but this went well beyond that. It was too big to fit it in my field of vision, filling nearly the entire sky.

"Wow..." Toriko mumbled. The sight was impressive enough to make us forget our earlier exchange, and I nodded in agreement.

"So this is where Hasshaku-sama's gate led..." I said.

We stood there awhile, basking in the evening sun. It was a sunset like none I'd seen before, and yet, at the same time, I felt like I had seen it, sometime, someplace.

I remembered running through the field together at dusk, laughing, after we'd gone hunting for Kunekunes. Our laughter back then had carried in it a fear of the unknown. We had been laughing in spite of our fear of the impending darkness of night. But in this brilliant evening scene, even that fear seemed to melt away. The sunset was so marvelous that I just wanted to keep walking into it forever. I'll bet anyone would have felt the same.

This place must have been deep in the Otherside, like the Beach of the End, or the bottom of the Kotoribako. I knew that intellectually, but I felt no fear whatsoever. There was a painful loneliness in my heart that tried to convince me this was a place we were meant to come to.

"Let's hold hands," I suggested, and Toriko took my left hand with a nod. The peaceful expression I saw on the profile of her face told me she felt the same as I did.

"Whenever we hold hands, you always use your right hand, huh, Toriko?" I pointed out.

"Oh, yeah?"

"You've been trying not to touch me with your left."

"Have I?"

"You thought I hadn't noticed?"

"Because you're dense, Sorawo."

"No, I'm...okay, yeah, maybe I am."

She must have thought it was funny that I was owning up to it, because Toriko let out a child-like laugh. Whenever Toriko touched

me, it was pretty much always with her right hand. If she used her left, it was always gloved.

That was largely because we still didn't understand the nature of her left hand. Considering that she had driven out the Yamanoke by slapping me on the back, and used it to damage one of Runa Urumi's Fourth Kind followers, there was no questioning that it had some effect on Otherside beings.

Though she acted like the changes to her body didn't bother her, I had noticed a long time ago that she was being careful that her left hand didn't hurt me.

Although she totally used both hands when she was squeezing my face just now...

"You don't need to worry so much. I mean, I'm always looking at you like normal."

"I know. You're looking at my face all the time, Sorawo."

When she said that so nonchalantly, I had no response.

Oh. So the feelings that I thought I was keeping hidden were actually super obvious...

Toriko cast a sideward glance at me as I remained silent. "If I haven't gotten messed up after all that staring, it's probably fine, right?" she asked.

"Or you could already be messed up..." I replied, struggling to find an out.

"Maybe," Toriko replied with a gentle smile.

How can anyone be so pretty?

I stared absently at Toriko's face, dyed crimson. If nothing had happened, we might have stayed standing there like that for all eternity. Or perhaps we would have walked into the sunset forever, hand-in-hand.

How badly did I want that? But, suddenly, there was a bang as something collapsed, and we both snapped back to our senses.

"Did you hear that...just now?" I asked.

"Yeah. Something's here."

I returned my Makarov to its holster and pulled the rifle off my shoulder. Toriko was doing the same. We tried waiting a while, but there was no sign of anything showing itself. Holding our rifles ready, we carefully headed in the direction of the noise.

We moved three doors in the direction of the sunset before spotting a fallen metal sign in front of the building on our right. Behind the sign was a dark alleyway. We kept our distance, trying to peer down it from the opposite side of the street, but there was nobody there. The ground near the entrance had been disturbed. Like someone who had been hiding behind the sign accidentally knocked it over, then decided to high-tail it out of there...

"I'll go look," Toriko said, approaching the alley.

"Be careful..." I said as I watched her go. Toriko crouched down at the entrance to the alleyway, then turned back to look at me.

"You said there was no child, right? That it was all just Hasshaku-sama's trap."

"Uh, yeah."

"Looks like you were wrong."

Look—she pointed, and I approached from behind her to peer down the alley. Little footprints had been left in the slightly moist dirt. One foot wearing a shoe, the other bare. The footprints were small, not even twenty centimeters long.

They were kid-sized.

"Huh...?" I said in confusion.

"See? There was a child after all."

The footprints continued deeper into the alley. The toe portions of the steps printed in the road with scattered puddles were dug in deep, and skewed a bit to the left or right.

"You think we can leave her?" Toriko asked, and I reluctantly shook my head.

"Well...it's not like we're going anywhere else. Let's take a look, at the very least," I responded. Toriko nodded as if she'd expected I would say that and started walking. I hurried after her.

"Hold on. I'll take point," I said.

"Okay. Please do."

The alley was too narrow for us to stand side-by-side. It was impossible to tell if something was amiss without my eye, so I had to be the one in front. I always felt uneasy in this situation, but it wasn't so bad knowing Toriko was there behind me. If things got dicey, I could count on her to push me aside and save me if she had to.

We cautiously advanced down the roughly one-meter-wide gap between houses. Weeds grew near the walls, and rotten boards and rusty metal pipes lay on the ground. The footprints got messy again near a puddle on the other end of the alleyway, perhaps indicating the person who made them had nearly tripped. I saw a handprint in the mud.

We came out onto the corner of another street where there was a red post box. It was the old cylindrical type, one I hadn't ever seen in the surface world. Its paint was peeling, and there was a muddy handprint on it in a low position.

"How do you think the picture postcards got sent?" Toriko asked, looking at the post box.

"What do you mean?"

"Even if we assume that they were a trap to lure us in, they had to enter the postal system somewhere in order to get to Michiko

Abarato's place, right? Like, if someone prepared the postcards, and then put them in the post box here...it's kind of weird imagining how they would end up at a post office in the surface world. If there's a monster from the Otherside delivering them, that's like something out of a fable, and if they just teleport to the post office, that's way too convenient."

"You've got a point. When you start analyzing scary stories, it's pretty common for them to just stop making sense," I said as I searched for more footprints. "There's that one common story where you find a black hair in your room, and you have no idea how it got there, right?"

"There is?"

"There is. The point of the story is to make you go, 'Ew, hair from people you don't know is gross. I'm scaaaared,' but I always wondered what'd happen if you took a good look at those hairs. Like, if you examine them under the microscope, do they have cuticles like they're supposed to? And if you extract the DNA, would you be able find out who they came from?"

"Hee hee. Sounds like forensics."

"But I'm right, aren't I? Having physical evidence like that means you should be able to investigate it in detail."

"Aren't there any stories where people investigated?"

"Yeah, but most of the time they don't find out anything. The samples suddenly disappear from storage in some cases, oh, and there's a lot of times where the people investigating go crazy, vanish, or commit suicide."

"Maybe that sort of deeper investigation is dangerous?"

"But in true ghost stories, it's surprisingly common for the person telling the story to be left with physical evidence. I started reading all these scary stories because I was hoping there might be another unknown world out there, somewhere. That's why it was always frustrating when people didn't investigate the physical evidence they had. I was like, 'Tell me more!'"

"Hee hee, y'know, that's kind of cute."

That wasn't the reaction I expected, and I didn't know how to respond. "No, it's not cute. I'm deadly serious. I was constantly raging at my monitor."

"I wish I could've met you back then."

"I'm glad you didn't. I was a nasty piece of work."

"That's fine. When we first met, you still kind of were."

"Harsh much...?" I turned to look back at her despite myself, and Toriko smiled.

"I'm happy for you. You finally found some physical evidence of your own, Sorawo."

“What do you mean?”

“The Otherside. It’s exactly the kind of physical evidence you’ve been talking about, isn’t it? Or am I wrong?”

Toriko was right.

I had encountered precisely the “other place” that I had been dreaming of as I read true ghost stories. This world was such a super massive piece of physical evidence that, even if I investigated as hard as I could, I would never be able to examine it all.

And on top of that, Toriko and I became physical evidence ourselves.

Her left hand, and my right eye. The reason we had been able to continue our exploration instead of ending up like the other victims had to be that we’d been integrated into the Otherside.

“What’s up?” Toriko called out to me and I realized I’d been standing there, staring at her left hand.

I shook my head. “You know, if we were to send a letter from here using that hand of yours, it might just arrive.”

Toriko chuckled and touched the post box.

“You want to give it a go? It’ll be like sending a postcard while we’re away on a trip.”

“To Kozakura? She’d definitely think we’re harassing her.”

We both had a good laugh and then started walking again.

The child’s footprints continued intermittently through the sunset town, leading us further and further along. From street to street, through alleyways and houses, jumping over drainage ditches... There were times we nearly lost the trail, but it wasn’t too difficult to find it again with a little searching. The kid didn’t seem to be trying to shake off pursuers, just running around willy-nilly.

The further we went, the stranger the streets became. At first the buildings were one or two stories tall, but before I knew it there were five-story buildings towering over us. The upper levels of the houses seemed to be bending towards us from both sides of the street, and they were connected by skyways.

Toriko looked up to the sky through the gaps in the buildings. “That sun’s sure not setting, huh?”

“Sure isn’t,” I agreed.



The massive evening sun showed no sign of moving. It just hung there, shining so very red. It lent the scenery around us the impression of also being stopped in time, never having changed from the past.

"That could be the kind of place this is...a world of perpetual sunset," I suggested.

"Are there any ghost stories like that?"

"Occasionally. There's this one story about going to the Otherside in an elevator. When they arrive on the top floor, the sky is bright red even though it should still be afternoon."

"How about this sort of old-timey town?"

"Feels like I've read stories about wandering into an antiquated town here and there. Walking through town, and wandering down a street that shouldn't have been there. Sometimes the story involves being tricked by a fox or tanuki."

When I told her that, Toriko made an amused expression as she looked down at the footprints. "You think this kid is a fox?" she asked.

"She could be a tanuki, you know?"

"When we find her, how about we take her to Kozakura's place? She seems to like tanuki."

"If the kid's a fox, you'd better not touch her. You'll die of Echinococcosis."

"What's that?"

"An infection caused by some nasty parasites."

The rows of buildings suddenly came to an end, and our field of view opened up. A wooden bridge crossed a stream outside town, and a field of red spider lilies were blooming on the other side. The trash scattered all over the place meant it didn't make for a particularly picturesque scene, though. With no obstructions, the sunset shone down over all of it.

"There," Toriko said.

I looked where Toriko was pointing and saw a figure tiny enough to almost disappear in the tall grass running towards an especially large mountain of trash. Even at a distance, I could tell she was the girl I'd seen on the thin film inside the jungle gym. There was something familiar about her running style—desperate, as if she was about to fall over.

"Doesn't look like a fox..." I said.

"Or a tanuki," Toriko agreed. "What do we do?"

For a moment, I didn't know how to answer. I mean, up until this point I had been questioning the very existence of the person leaving behind the footprints. But now that the kid was right here in front of me, that same sensation welled up inside me. *I can't leave her like this. I've got to save her*, it said.

Toriko took one look at my face and then nodded without a word. Our legs picked up speed on their own as we followed the kid. We had to watch out for glitches as we went, though, so we couldn't run with all our might the way she could.

"Toriko, there may be something wrong with me."

"Like what?"

"When I see that kid, I reflexively think I need to save her. That's gotta be weird. I feel like something's happened to me."

Toriko stared at me, dumbfounded, then blinked. "Sorawo... Uh, I don't think there's anything weird about that at all," she hesitantly informed me.

"Huh?"

"If someone's wandered in here, it's only natural to want to help them, isn't it?"

"Yeah, you would say that, Toriko, but..."

I know I'm not that good of a person.

Considering this was the other side of Hasshaku-sama's gate, this had to be her influencing our minds too. Toriko was already the type to help people, so she wouldn't notice any difference, but I did. Even if we managed to catch up to that kid, I was sure she'd just turn out to be some sort of disgusting monster. I knew how these Otherside types operated. Well, that was fine by me. I'd blow her away, the same as we always did.

Toriko probably wasn't going to be able to react immediately. Turning her gun on something that looked like a kid wasn't something a gentle soul like Toriko could handle. I'd have to be the one to take the shot. I didn't like it either, and Toriko was probably gonna be really weirded out by me doing it, but...if something tries to kill you, you need to kill it first.

We were getting closer to the mound of trash that floated like an island in a sea of red spider lilies. Between a junked three-wheel automobile, a CRT television with a wooden body, and a steel-reinforced paulownia dresser, even the garbage here was retro. The child crawled through a gap in the randomly piled trash.

Running out of breath at the foot of the mountain, we peered through the gap in the garbage. A pitch-black tunnel underneath a wooden table led deep inside.

We turned on our lights and shone them into the hole; the tunnel was less than a meter tall. The garbage piled on top of it looked stable, but I wasn't about to start shaking any of it to find out for sure.

"Hey!" Toriko shouted down the tunnel. "Are you okay? It's dangerous to go in there!"

We waited a while, but there was no response.

Toriko looked at me with a frown. "What do we do?"

“Hmm...”

I didn't know what to do either. Going in after the kid seemed way too reckless...but, just as I was thinking that, I got startled by something that I hadn't expected to see.

I was there—my doppelganger was. Not far away, just standing around like she was in a daze.

She raised her right hand, pointing towards the tunnel.

Still not looking in my direction.

“Sorawo, what's up?”

“Uh...nothing.”

When I looked away, the doppelganger vanished.

You want me to go in there? Is that it...?

It reminded me of the time that my doppelganger led me to Toriko. I was looking for someone else now, but maybe I could still trust her...?

“Sorawo?”

I sighed and crouched down at the entrance. “Oh, fine. I'll go take a look.”

“I'll go too.”

“No. If we're together and it collapses, that'd be the worst. Hold on for a bit. I'll scope it out and then call for you.”

“Okay... Be careful.” Toriko's voice was full of concern as she placed a hand on my back.

I resolved myself before entering the tunnel on all-fours. Needing to use one of my hands to hold the light was cumbersome. I added a headlamp to my mental shopping list, then proceeded to crawl further into the darkness. Thankfully, despite all the trash, it didn't stink.

I think the tunnel was five meters long, if that, though it sure felt like a lot more. Then it opened up, becoming tall enough for me to stand. I was careful not to hit my head as I rose, then shone my light around the area. This was a sort of semi-cylindrical space that had formed inside the trash heap. It was maybe nine square meters, if that.

“You okay in there, Sorawo?”

“Just fine. It's opened up a bit here.”

“Can I join you?”

“Hold on a bit longer. I'll check it out...”

Drawing my Makarov, I looked around again. There was no sign of the kid who'd supposedly fled in here. Were there other tunnels, maybe?

As I shone my light on the walls, I caught sight of a human-sized mass lying on the ground and nearly jumped up into the air. On closer inspection, it was a sleeping bag. I hesitantly took a peek inside. It was already unzipped and empty. It looked like someone had deserted it in a hurry. There was a silver mat laid out on the ground underneath it.

The kind used to conserve heat when camping.

I hadn't noticed it in all the garbage, but there was a backpack sitting at the head of the sleeping bag. I approached, and...it stank. Of human body odor...the kind that a person who hadn't bathed in a long time tended to have. As I was wavering between wanting to investigate and not wanting to touch it, I noticed a single photo inside the sleeping bag.

I turned my light on it, then gulped.

It was a photo of Michiko Abarato.

A picture of his wife—did that mean that Abarato was here...?

That's when I sensed something behind me and turned around.

The kid, who had apparently been hiding under a blanket, poked her head out halfway to look at me. When our eyes met, she darted out of her hiding place with all the speed of a cornered animal, her eyes glinting in the darkness.

I reflexively focused my right eye on the kid. She cried out and looked away. It was like she'd been bathed in fire. Before I could turn my gun on her, she'd turned around and fled down the tunnel.

"Sorawo, what was that?!"

"Heading your way! Be careful!"

"What's heading my—Whoa!"

There was shouting and the sounds of a scuffle. I gave chase, hurrying back down the tunnel.

When I got outside, Toriko had captured the kid. Toriko was holding her from behind as the child thrashed around trying to escape.

"Ahhh! Gahhh!" The child screamed like a wild animal as Toriko held her down, making sure she couldn't get away.

"Shh! It's okay. It's okay. Calm down," Toriko said in a relaxed voice as she desperately tried to restrain the kid. I couldn't help but stare in awe. I feel like she'd calmed me down before that way too. When was it...?

"S-Sorawo! Lend me a hand here!"

That snapped me back to my senses. I rushed over, getting the child's flailing arms under control.

"It's okay. It's going to be okay. We're not going to do anything to you, so settle—Ow!" I cried out loud when she kicked me as hard as she could. "Stop struggling already! Ow! That hurts!"

Between the punching and the hair pulling, the kid gradually wore herself out and quieted down. Her breathing was ragged, and her eyes wide. She really was like a captured beast.

Toriko, her hair disheveled, panted. "She's not a fox or a tanuki, right?!" she asked.

I took another look at the kid she was holding. It was a girl. Her long, black hair was uneven, having been allowed to grow freely, and

the black one-piece she wore was dirty and tattered. The one shoe she had still been wearing had fallen off somewhere, leaving her barefoot. Her whole body was filthy, and she looked emaciated. She was still young—five or six at the oldest.

“No doubt about it—she’s human.”

The girl’s eyes followed me closely as I answered. Exhausted as she was, she was still searching for her chance to get away. I could tell, because I’d have been doing the same thing in her position.

“Ah...!”

Suddenly, the pieces fell into place for me.

Is that it? Is that why I felt I had to help this girl...?

I looked at the girl in front of me with new eyes.

From the look of her, she must have been through a number of scary experiences since wandering into the other world. But this kid wasn’t just quivering in terror, she was desperately trying to survive.

Just like I’d done.

It was almost as if she’d read my thoughts. The child blinked, then furrowed her brow. She stopped acting like a cat with its hackles raised. Her tense arms and legs visibly relaxed.

Even Toriko, who was holding her from behind, could tell. Toriko set her down gently. The girl stood up on her own and looked up at me. Even without Toriko restraining her, she didn’t try to escape immediately.

Toriko crouched down, and spoke in a gentle voice. “Sorry for frightening you. I’m Toriko. And this is Sorawo. Who are you?”

The child said nothing.

“Were you alone all this time? You must have been scared. But it’s going to be okay now. You can go home.”

The kid looked at Toriko, bewildered. She seemed not to understand what was being said.

“Oh! Maybe you’re not Japanese. *Hello? Bonjour? Ni hao? Annyeonghaseyo?*”

None of those greetings got a response. As Toriko and I looked at one another, the child slowly opened her mouth and said, “*In short, this may be Sorawo’s ‘cognitive interface’ in physical form.*”

“...?!”

“*Something like the skin that forms over milk if you—*”

The kid stopped mid-word, surprised by the looks of shock on our faces.

“What’d you just say?” I asked, but the kid seemed scared, and said no more.

Then, it came back to me. That had been a fragment of a conversation we’d had with Kozakura.

I think something similar to this had happened before. When

beings from the Otherside tried to make contact with us, they imitated our words...

Driven by some implacable feeling of concern, I asked, "Hey, kid, where did you come from...?"

The girl looked away as if she hadn't heard me, gazing in the direction of the evening sun that wouldn't set. When we turned to look too, there was a resonating noise, like that of a bell tolling somewhere.

Dong... Before that heavy tone had completely faded, the scene before us turned blue as we watched.

The world that had been dyed red until moments before was painted blue in the blink of an eye. The massive sun was now an ultrablue disc.

No, that was no sun—it was a massive hole in the sky. We were illuminated by the light that shone from the Otherside's abyss.

Dong... The bell tolled once more, shaking the air.

"Sorawo, that thing... Was that there before?"

I looked to see what Toriko was talking about, and there was a black, steel tower that looked like Tokyo Tower towering over the streets on the other side of the field.

The top of the tower seemed to have faded streamers clinging to it, blowing in the wind. The moment I saw them, for some reason, I imagined long, black hair—a woman's black hair, stubbornly wrapped around my fingers...

"Hasshaku-sama?" The name slipped from my lips without conscious thought.

"That's her? How do you figure?" Toriko said keeping her voice low, her brow furrowed. "It looks more like it's eight hundred feet tall than eight..."

I stared up at the tower vacantly, unable to reply, until suddenly there was a tug on my hand. I looked down and there was a girl holding my hand and frowning.

"What...?" I asked.

The girl turned her back on me, like she was irritated by my vague question. She started walking towards the evening sun quickly, still holding onto my arm.

"Wh-Whoa, hold on," I called after her, but she didn't turn to look back at me, just kept walking urgently.

"Don't you think she's trying to tell us to come with her...?" Toriko sounded a little out of it too.

It looked like her guess was right, though. The girl glanced at my other hand, entwined with Toriko's and hurried her pace.

For a moment, I thought I saw a flash of silver phosphorescence, and then we were in a long hallway.

Toriko raised her voice in surprise.

“Something touched my hand just now.”

The hallway had wood flooring that creaked under our shoes. There were latticed windows along either side, and nothing but blue light on the other side of them. It was a deep blue reminiscent of the sea, and the moment I thought I had caught sight of something there was another silver flash that changed the scene.

This time, we were outside. On the roof. There were similar blocky buildings all around us, concrete bridges running from one to the next. The sky was completely blue, reminding me of the sky we’d seen on the beach at the end of the world. Just as I crossed the building and put my foot on one of the bridges, my vision went silver again.

We were in a wasteland. There wasn’t so much as a blade of grass in the ashen landscape that stretched out to the horizon. Nothing but round boulders and thorny, dead trees obstructed our line of sight. Up ahead, I could see a black tower much like the one from before. There were others of the same shape all over the wasteland. The tips of them shone, as if they had noticed us, and then released blue waves. It was a bizarre sight, like paint floating in midair.

Just before rapidly spreading waves could reach us, the scene changed again. It was a gloomy forest, and I could sense massive creatures crawling around above the treetops. I could spot bright blue scales through the thick foliage...

Each time we walked forward, the scenery changed. I’d had a similar experience at the rotating observational platform where we’d encountered the Yamanoke and with the Time-space Man, but this was my first time we were so vividly aware of it. Toriko and I were both dumbfounded. I don’t know how she did it, but the girl holding my hand seemed to be moving through aspects of the other world.

In every one of them, something blue was waiting for us. Was it gradually closing in? Or getting further away? I couldn’t tell right away. But as we traveled through a phantasmagoria of disjointed scenes, the pressure I felt from the ultrablue gradually shrank.

Simultaneously, the shifting scenes got more similar to the real world that I knew. A classroom with a blue chalkboard, a rice paddy with a blue scarecrow, a pachinko parlor in the countryside with a blue neon sign. The deserted scenes gradually got louder, until I started catching glimpses of vague figures of people, like they were on the other side of frosted glass. The signs were getting more legible too.

“Wait, are we getting further from the Otherside?”

“You think so too, Toriko?”

“Yeah. If this keeps up, we’re going to end up somewhere in the surface world...”

Toriko and I looked at one another, sudden realization on our faces.

“Sorawo... Isn’t that bad?”

“Wh-What should we do? We’re heading back!”

It would be absolutely terrible if we got tossed out into a place full of people while we were toting guns. The girl kept on going, paying no mind to us as we panicked.

“Can’t you control where we emerge?” Toriko asked.

“How?!”

“Can you use your eye to see where we’re going?!”

I looked around with my right eye like she suggested, but the whole area was wrapped in silver fog. With fog in all directions, I couldn’t tell which way we should go. Occasionally, the fog thinned, and I could see the other side. Whenever I did, the girl went that way.

If I could find a place that seemed devoid of people, I might be able to guide her there. I stared into the fog. As I did, the figures we passed by grew more distinct. There were even indications of them moving to avoid us, on turning to look once we passed. As my eyes darted around, I started to notice familiar places out of the corners of my eyes.

Suzuran Street in Jinbouchou, the park in front of the Alta in Shinjuku, the front of the Junkudo in Ikebukuro... Was I seeing where my mind was directing us? Well, these were all no good. There were too many people. I needed somewhere less populated, somewhere it would be okay for us to have guns...

“Oh, I know!” I shouted without meaning to, and the little girl looked up at me reproachfully. Not caring much about appearances now, I pointed in the direction I wanted to go.

“Let’s go this way! This way!”

The girl gave me a dubious look, but changed course. The fog cleared, and a familiar scene spread out before our eyes. My relief lasted only a moment. The girl made no attempt to stop, so I hurriedly said, “Toriko, open the gate!”

“O-On it!”

The moment after Toriko’s left hand swept away the space in front of us, we were abruptly thrown out into the surface world.

We were standing in front of Kozakura’s front door.

Just as the girl stopped, dumbstruck, the door in front of us opened, and Kozakura came out of the house wearing blue clogs. Her eyes bugged out when she saw us on her doorstep.

Looking from me, to Toriko, to the filthy girl, Kozakura furrowed her brow. “Did you kidnap her...?”

“No, we didn’t.”

“Uh, then...” Seemingly unsatisfied with my answer, Kozakura

looked the girl up and down again. The girl backed away, obviously wary, and hid behind us.

“Did you give birth?”

Yeah, right.

6

“What do you think that was, ultimately?”

It was a few days later. We’d chosen to meet up at Mickey D’s, and were picking away at a box of chicken nuggets while idly talking about what had happened.

When we got back, the unidentified girl had been given a thorough washing in Kozakura’s bathroom before being taken to DS Research. We went along and tried to communicate with her, but it ultimately proved fruitless. It was decided that DS Research would look after her while they were checking missing persons reports.

“Think the girl could be Abarato’s daughter?” Toriko asked.

“I’m gonna guess no... I mean, Abarato only ever talked about his wife, and the wife never said anything about a missing child.”

“Abarato had camped out in the mountain of trash, right?”

“It’s not like I had the chance to thoroughly investigate, but that was the impression I got.”

“Was it a coincidence she was there, you think?”

“I wonder.”

“If something about the Otherside lured us in...and then Hasshaku-sama sent us to an even deeper place...maybe they wanted us to do something there? Did they just want us to find Abarato’s camp?” Toriko asked.

“If we’re going with the hypothesis that they were acting with some purpose...maybe they wanted us to find that girl?”

“What for?”

“Dunno...”

I licked the mustard sauce from my fingers and reached for my Coke. As I put the straw in my mouth and leaned back in my chair, my eyes met with Toriko’s, which were fixated on me.

“Hm?”

“No, it’s nothing.” Toriko shook her head, leaning back in her chair too as she let out a sigh. “We never did figure out what happened to Abarato... What should we tell his wife?”

“Yeah, about that... I don’t think we need to say anything.”

“Huh?”

I pulled a single postcard out of my bag and laid it on the table. It was addressed to me. No sender.

“Found it in my mailbox when I was heading out today.”

“Can I look?”

When Toriko turned the postcard over she got a dubious look on her face. “What is this?” she asked.

The back of the postcard had a photo on it. Under the words, “We got married,” in a cheap-looking font was a print of a photo that looked like it had been taken with a dirty camera lens. In the front of the picture was Michiko Abarato, her lipstick an aggressively deep red. Behind her was a white building at an odd angle. There was a man in the second floor window, and he was facing the camera, but the image was compressed, making him look like a figure made out of gray clay. The black trees behind the house might have actually been steel towers in the distance.

“Can you think of any reason to send a photo like this?” I asked, and Toriko shook her head silently.

“It makes no sense, right?” I continued. “I thought she was sane at first, but no, she really was nuts. That probably wasn’t the real Michiko Abarato.”

“Who was it, then? An impostor?”

“Nobody, I guess. An MIB, like the three middle-aged ladies...”

“She looked human, but was part of a phenomenon?”

“Yeah. So we’re better off not contacting her again, and there’s no point in trying. If you want the postcard, it’s all yours.”

“I don’t.”

“Yeah, me neither. Let’s junk it.”

We grabbed our trays and stood up. I opened the lid to the garbage, tilted the tray into it...then, just before it fell in, I changed my mind and rescued the postcard.

“You’re not gonna throw it out?”

“Nah... On second thought, we should sell it to DS Research.”

Toriko’s eyes widened with exasperation. “You think they’ll buy it?”

“We need to head out there anyway, and it doesn’t hurt to ask.”

“I haven’t been to their building in ages.”

“Yeah, you haven’t. Last time I went would’ve been...was it because Runa Urumi woke up? No, I guess not. It was to discuss doing construction on the Farm.”

“Huh? What? Runa Urumi? She got better?”

“Didn’t I tell you?” I asked.

“This is the first I’m hearing of it.”

Waving the creepy postcard around as I went outside, we headed down to the subway station.

Works Referenced

This work uses many preexisting true ghost stories and pieces of net lore as its motifs. In particular, this section will note those which have been used directly. This will touch on the content of the main book, so if you are concerned about spoilers, please tread carefully.

■File 16: Hotel Pontianak

The depiction of the thing that Akari and Natsumi encounter, which Sorawo suggests might have been a Pontianak, is based on the story “Pontianak.” This was posted to the 2channel message board’s Occult/Paranormal Phenomena Board in “Honnori to Kowai Hanashi Sure Sono 94” [Slightly Scary Stories Thread #94], posts 922-951 (6/22/2013). The storyteller, a person from Singapore, is at a training camp after being drafted into the military. While on a two-man patrol at night, they encounter a “female monster,” which causes the teller’s partner to go crazy and commit suicide. It is especially detailed for a military ghost story, and the fact that it was written by a foreign teller in Japanese is unusual.

The Pontianak is a supernatural phenomenon spoken widely across southeast Asia, but primarily in Indonesia and Malaysia. It can be the ghost of a woman who died while pregnant, or a severed head with dangling organs. The way the Pontianak acts and looks varies regionally, and in this work it’s all forgotten in a drunken haze without us ever learning what exactly it was.

■File 17: Looking at the Past in the Diagonal Mirror

The depiction of Sorawo using the mirrors of the interstitial space to tune her vision comes from “Shashi” [Strabismus] which was posted to the 2channel message board’s Occult/Paranormal

Phenomena Board in “Honori to Kowai Hanashi Sure Sono 76” [Slightly Scary Stories Thread #76], posts 685-690 (24/8/2011). It is an account where the storyteller, a person who is experiencing strabismus due to an accident in their youth, looks at a mirror with their lazy eye and notices their mirror image acting differently from them.

The woman with long, mantis-like hands appeared in “4F no Joshi Toire” [The Ladies’ Toilet on the Fourth Floor] which was posted to the 2channel message board’s Married Women Board in the “[Kyoufu] Tsuyu ga Kite mo Kowai Hanashi [Shinrei] 11” [[Terror] Scary Stories Even in the Rainy Season [Ghost] 11] thread, posts 932 and 934 (7/8/2006). She appears in the mirror of the fourth floor women’s restroom of an amusement complex near a train station. When the staff approach her because of the bizarre foot-dragging way she walks, she tries to hug them.

Incidentally, while I was in the middle of writing File 17, I reread one of Takeshobo Horror Bunko’s true ghost stories collections and ran into a story about a woman who appeared in the mirror at a shopping mall, or a department store, or some sort of commercial establishment. I hadn’t paid attention when reading it before, but this time I saw several points it shared in common with “4F no Joshi Toire.” I meant to include it in this Works Referenced list, but had completely forgotten which volume it was in a few days later. If anyone knows and can tell me, it would be appreciated. I don’t think it was a recent book, but I’m not sure. It may have all been a dream.

■File 18: Alone Together in a Mayoiga

As touched on in the main text, “Mayoiga” (or “Mayohiga”) is a widely known story from Kunio Yanagita’s *Tono Monogatari* (Legends of Tono). It is a folktale that was passed down from the Tohoku Region to the Kanto Region and can easily be found in books about folklore. Variations of it are rare online, but one example would be “Mayohiga” [Lost House] which was posted to the 2channel message board’s Occult/Paranormal Phenomena Board in the “*Yama ni Matsuwaru Kowai Fushigi na Hanashi Part 44*” [Scary/Strange Stories Involving the Mountains Part 44], post 72 (11/6/2009). The building which the reporter’s female friend’s grandmother encountered was a “little castle that looked like you might find it in Germany or Lichtenstein,” and what drifted down the river was not a bowl, but a

beautiful comb. The depiction in this work doesn't take any specific story as its motif, but I incorporated the general feeling of it by using a building that was a compromise between Western and Japanese designs.

■File 19: Hasshaku-sama Revival

In regards to Hasshaku-sama, I would like to refer you to the reference section for File 2 in the first volume.

The story that Sorawo touches on in this file—where, when they step out of the elevator, the sky is bright red—is “Ikai e no Tobira” [The Door to Another World] which was already mentioned in the explanation for File 1. However, another similar story, “Erebeta no Soto” [Outside the Elevator] was posted to the 2channel message board's Occult/Paranormal Phenomena Board in “Fukakai na Taiken, Nazo no Hanashi ~enigma~ Part 59” [Incomprehensible Experiences, Mysterious Stories ~enigma~ Part 59], posts 553 and 554 (13/1/2010). This is another experiential report of someone stepping out of an elevator to find that the sky is bright red even though it should still be afternoon. That the town below is dark and silent is another point the stories share in common.

“Ojii-san to Basu” [The Old Man and the Bus], which was posted in “Fukakai na Taiken, Nazo no Hanashi ~enigma~ Part 48” [Incomprehensible Experiences, Mysterious Stories ~enigma~ Part 59], posts 467-467 (24/11/2008), is an account of meeting an old man on the bus to Kichijoji, and being sent to an empty town lit with bright red light. We could also say this is a variation of “Jikkuu no Ossan” [The Time-space Man].

There are a number of such accounts of wandering into impossible towns lit by the setting sun from time to time, but the specific motif for this work is “Mayooikonda Machi no Koto” [About the Town I Wandered Into] contained in *Ayakashi Tsuushin Kyuuya de Okuru Kowai Hanashi* [Ayakashi News — Scary Stories on the Ninth Night] (Osako Junichi, Jitsugyo no Nihon Sha, 1991). The bizarre scene the author claims to have encountered as a child of “five-story wooden houses connected by skywalks” left a strong impression on me from the first time I read it. It is one of the original sources of *Otherside Picnic*.

Ayakashi Tsuushin, which was published in 1991, shares a number of stories with *Shinmimibukuro Anata no Kowai Hanashi* [Shinmimibukuro — Your Scary Stories] (Hirokatsu Kihara/Ichirou

Nakayama, Fusosha Publishing, 1990) which was composed of interviews with people who experienced supernatural events and gave rise to a boom in “true ghost stories.” It is an important entry in the history of the genre. The first edition is difficult to obtain now, but it was republished in 2002 by Haruki Horror Bunko under the title *Akayashi Stuuushin “Kai”* [Ayakashi News “Strange”]. This edition is likewise out of print, but may be somewhat easier to locate.

Incidentally, the other long-running series from Keibunsha “*Chou” Kowai Hanashi* [“Super” Scary Stories] also began publication in 1991. (If we look for a hit before this, some might suggest the writings of Junji Inagawa from the ’80s, but if you ask me, those are better interpreted as examples of ghost stories as literature.) If we look back at the way the trend of true ghost stories has continued uninterrupted for decades since then, it’s actually quite surprising. It means that there are an incredible number of people in our world (how many tens of thousands?) who have had frightening or mysterious experiences. And those are only the ones who committed them to text. There are already hundreds (maybe a thousand?) of such books piled up, and the number keeps growing. Is that not a somewhat unsettling fact?

I know I always say this, but I would like to give my thanks to the people who reported the many other true ghost stories and net lore from which I have taken direct or indirect influence.

Thank you for your continued enjoyment and for being frightened. I hope this book can repay my gratitude in some small way.



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Otherside Picnic: Volume 5

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